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SEPT.

5 ACTION PACKED NOVELETS

FIGHT IT OUT!
by Oscar Schisgall

LOCKED HORNS
by G. W. Barrington

RANGE WAR
by Cliff Campbell

A BLUE RIBBON MAGAZINE

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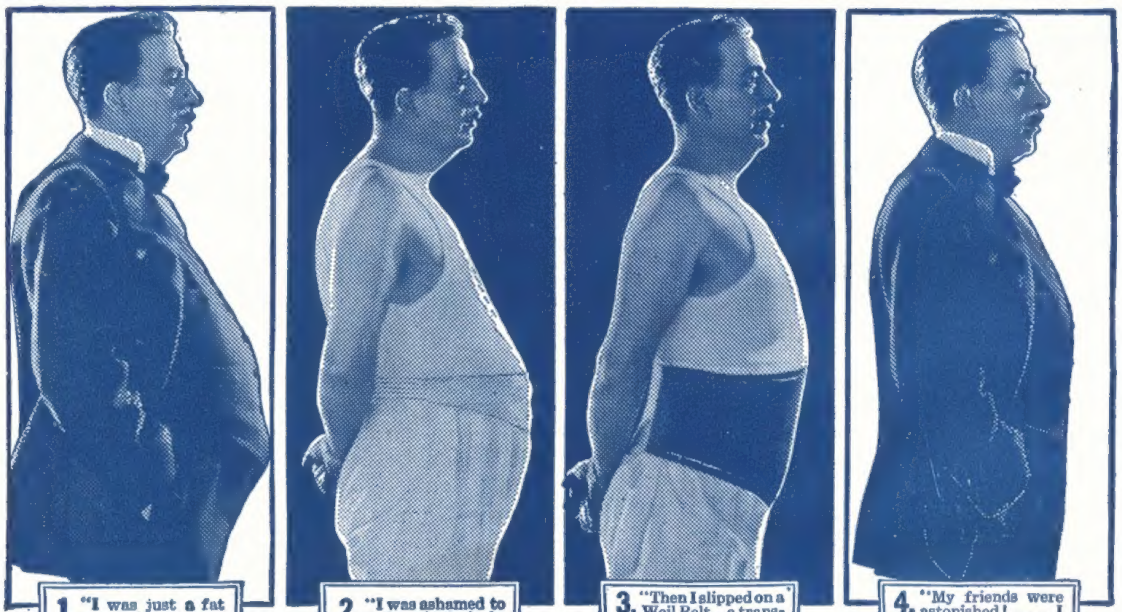

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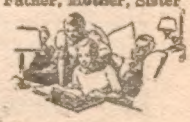

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5 ACTION-PACKED NOVELETTES—10c

Vol. I, No. V

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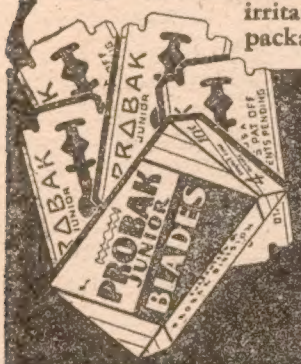

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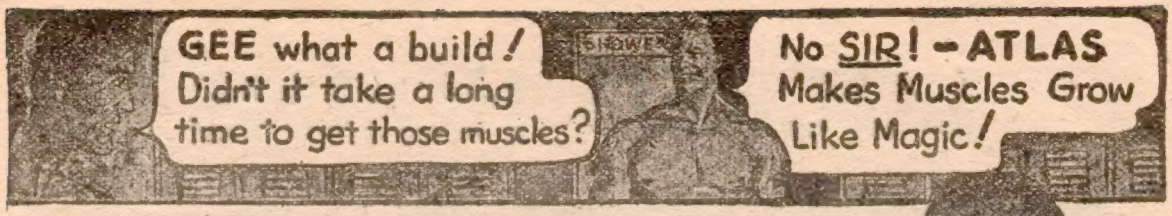

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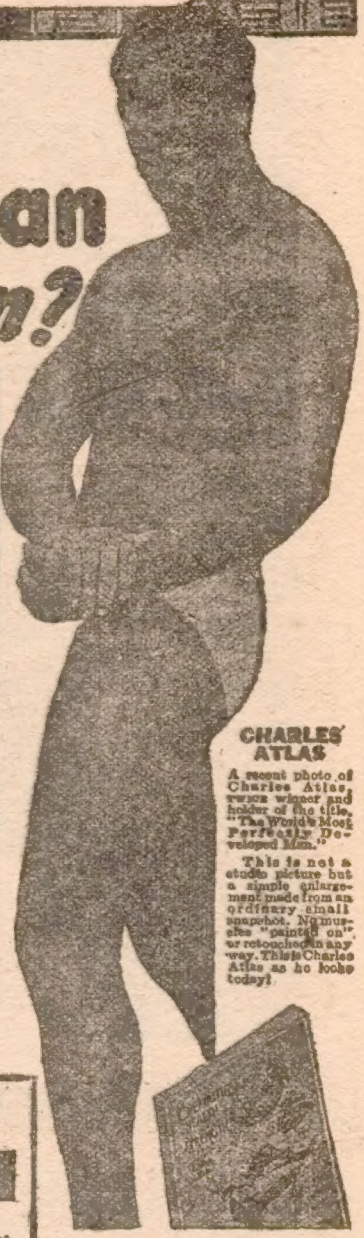

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A recent photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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Make me PROVE it! Gamble a postage stamp. Send coupon for my FREE BOOK AT ONCE! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 4T, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

LOCKED HORNS

HARRY BANE—better known to his intimates as "Speed" Bane—set the pan of sizzling bacon a little aside from the hottest part of the cedar-bough fire and turned his sandy head to make a quick inspection of the waving blue-green sage-brush that crested the big domed knoll on which he had spent the night.

Speed was more curious than alarmed or uneasy. Trailing up from the Platte River range on his way into the Black Hills, he had just reached the foothills country, so considered that he had no enemies there.

Yet, it was but a day's ride to the ill-famed Badlands of South Dakota, and the skulking denizens of that sinister section did not always stay in their chosen habitat. One of them might be coming to loot his camp.

The hoofbeats that had diverted his attention from his breakfast

A SWIFT MOVING NOVELETTE

by G .W. BARRINGTON

It was quick triggers and hot lead that Speed Bane bucked when he rode hell-for-leather into a renegade's hang-out, with his holsters tied down and ready for action.

preparations click-clocked over rock at some distance, then subsided to a subdued padding as the hidden horse took to softer footing. Speed flecked a steel blue eye toward the rifle that lay handy on his open bedroll, but did not get it. Men of the out-of-doors dislike the appearance of anticipating trouble. They are afraid of being thought afraid.

Someone was coming, with the smoke of the campfire as a guide. Well, let him come. It was a free country—in a way. Maybe the feller wanted to sit in for a bite of chuck.

Nevertheless, Bane sauntered a bit

nearer the rifle, still a little uncertain. He grinned sheepishly at his own uneasiness when out of a cedar clump north of the fire ambled a little, white, Crow pony—the lightest saddle animal he ever had seen outside a city. On its back was the smallest and youngest rider he ever had seen anywhere.

Evidently not more than five, the urchin was tow-headed, freckled, alert eyed, and his babyish face wore a look of sober responsibility that caused Bane to throw back his sandy head and laugh impolitely. As the young visitor passed the fire and reined in, Speed's amusement grew when he noted that the child wore boots a dozen sizes too large for him, which, with their long-shanked, locked-rowel spurs would have made it practically impossible for him to have taken a step, had he been set afoot. Also, the fringed quirt lopped about his chubby wrist must have been a load, though, despite it, he handled the reins with that hand alone, as he stepped the cayuse nearer and halted again, only yards from the camper.

Then Speed saw something else that was out of proportion, but was not altogether laughable.

Only the left side of the boy and pony had been presented, when he entered camp. Now his right hand swung up from where it had been hidden behind the pony's body. It held a long-barreled Colt 38' that came to a level with the frowning blue muzzle pointed directly at the camper's chest. The hammer was back, and a pudgy finger lay on the trigger—a hair trigger, for all Speed knew. Back of the gun, the childish face wore a look of grim determination that could not be mistaken.

THE situation was ludicrous enough, but Speed Bane didn't laugh. A gun is a gun, no matter who holds it; and this gun remained lined and steady.

"Well, young'un, what's it all about?" Speed asked, when the boy remained silent, watching him warily. "What do you want, anyway?"

"I'm huntin' rustlers," the childish treble came, and the little fellow threw his chest out importantly.

Speed chuckled appreciatively. "Durned if you ain't fixed to corral 'em, too.

"Yes sir, you're heeled. Good new gun, loaded with all it will carry. Know how to handle it, too. Bet you could knock a rustler over without stopping to take steady aim.

"Mighty good outfit you got, Kid, take it all around—boots, spurs, hat, belt, and—

"Let's see, though. Hey, this never is going to do. A real go-gitting rustler-hunter like you ought to wear the whole works, and you ain't got a holster on.

"Shucks, it must be tough to have to carry that big gun in your hand all the time you're out scouting.

"Let's see, now. Maybe we can do something about that."

On the day before, Speed had bought a new pair of gauntlets. The out-worn ones were lying in a clutter of clothing by the bedroll. He picked one up, cut off all the finger-stalls but one, the end of which he nipped off. After he had made two slits for the belt in the under side of the cuff, he presented it to the big-eyed youngster. "There you are, all fringed pretty and with a gilt star on it. Uncinch that belt and le's get it on you."

Intrigued at once, the boy made no resistance when Speed took the gun to allow him free use of his hands. While the youngster was adjusting the holster on the belt, Speed slyly

broke the six and extracted the shells. "There you are," he said, slipping the gun into the improvised holster the boy was patting into place admiringly. "Darned if you ain't fixed up plumb proper, now.

"But, wait a second. Where you going in such a rush?"

"To hunt rustlers," the lad answered, as he started the nimble pony off at a busy jog.

"But maybe you better haze me home and show me to the folks," Speed suggested. "I'm a rustler, you know, and you caught me fair and square."

"No yuh ain't," the youngster called back over his shoulder as the pony broke into a canter. "You're a good feller, and I wanta get 'quainted with you when I get time.

"Us white men oughta stick together."

"Some kid," Speed grunted, as he returned to the cooking. "He hadn't ought to be allowed to run loose, packing that he-man gun, though, and I'll bet a new hat he stole it and that quirt and the boots from his dad or big brother when he started out to round up bad men. All the sam-ee, he handles a hawse like an old-timer and knows which end of a gun the lead comes out of. If he don't kill himself or somebody else before he gets dry behind the ears, he ought to get along fine in this man's country.

"Wonder who his folks are, and where they—

"Hell's delight! What's up now?"

OVER among the cedars, a gun-lock had clicked menacingly. As Speed set the pan of bacon aside for the second time, a girl stepped into view, a neat, chestnut filly following her, doglike. As she advanced toward him keeping the gun at a ready, he appraised her quickly and decided that she was the prettiest thing he ever had laid eyes on. The glory of coppery hair that showed below the flat brim of her pearl hat was breath-taking. The eyes were so deep blue that they looked like violets under water. Her riding suit of grey flannel served to set off the clean lines of her slender, girlish figure, every movement of which was as graceful and unstudied as that of ripe grain swaying before a summer breeze.

"Stand up and raise your hands," she snapped, stopping on the opposite side of the ruddy fire to frown across it at him.

Speed came erect, but left his hands as they were. "I hate to disappoint a lady, but there's nothing overhead that I'm pining to reach for."

Her finely chiseled chin thrust out, and the deep eyes flashed. "There's something that you'd better want to reach for."

"Not on this side of the fire."

Her oval face flushed, and she stamped a booted foot impatiently. "Chaff! I don't appreciate being flattered by a cheap rustler."

"I've been called that before."

"No doubt. And you'll live to be called that again, if you get those hands up, quick."

Speed shook his head again. "Sorry, but I just don't care to accommodate you—especially as I don't know what's making you so ringy."

Her even teeth clicked. "Don't fool yourself! I tell you I'll shoot."

"Crack down when the spirit moves you. I've been shot at by a whole lot worse looking folks than you.

"In fact, after sizin' you up as best I can with my eyes dazzled, I've decided that being shot by you would be an honor and a right pleasant experience. Furthermore, as I re-

marked a while ago, if shooting travelers is your quaint way of enjoying yourself, I wouldn't interfere with your pleasure for a good hawse.

"When you're ready, Gridley, fire, as Dewey said just before he burnt the shirt-tails off the Spanish, at Manila."

Speed's nonchalant attitude was not altogether bravado. He had heard fighting talk before, and he knew that when argument starts, shooting usually is postponed indefinitely. He was not greatly worried; never-the-less, he heaved a sigh of relief when she bit her lip hesitantly, then lowered the rifle and favored him with a smile that made him dizzy.

"Rustler or no rustler, you're practically unshootable, right now," she admitted, whimsically. "If you'd made a hostile move, or even looked wicked, it would have been different; but when you just stand there and look at me, I'm helpless, I guess."

"Yeh, and I'm helpless when you look at me, I get plumb weak-jointed."

"Maybe we'd better call it a draw, for the time being, then."

Speed grinned and turned back to his bacon frying. "Sensible decision. Wait till I cuff a little chuck together and we'll talk things over while we're eating."

She shook her red-amber head in refusal. "I may be soft enough to let a rustler live, but I won't eat with him."

"I ain't so gosh-dang particular," Speed came back wickedly. "Sit right down and make yourself at home."

The oval face flamed again. "You've no right to call me a rustler."

"As much right as you have to call me one—to say nothing about threatening to gun me some."

She leaned the rifle across the bedroll, and sat down, eyeing him aslant. Speed flipped the bacon over, then handed the work to her and turned the handle of the fryingpan within her reach. "Go ahead and tend that while I mess around with other things. Birds of a feather flock together. If we're both rustlers—accused rustlers, anyway—we might throw in together and do a big business.

"I reckon we better call this camp Rustlers' Roost."

AFTER browning the bacon, she watched interestedly while he flipped flapjacks, made gravy, fried potatoes. When the coffeepot sent off a steam of enticing aroma to blend with the other savory odors she sniffed daintily and surrendered. "I've breakfasted, of course, but this is different," she smiled. "Under such circumstances, I could eat with any owl-hoot hombre."

"Well, sit in and eat your filling," he invited, adding the pan of potatoes to the other food he had placed by the fire. "Between bites, tell me what's making you so hostile."

"I never converse with strangers, and we haven't been introduced," she reminded him, demurely.

He rose, gravely and shrugged his well-knit shoulders into corduroy coat, buttoned it snugly, bowed politely: "Introducing Speed Bane, cow nudger from Commanche, Texas, and points south and west of there. He's riding through on his way to the blackest part of the Black Hills. He's going to start a hawse spread up there, and don't care a cuss who knows it. He's 22, five feet eleven, weight 160. Yes, he's unmarried." and sat down. "I've done my share," he prompted, suggestively.

She bowed sedately. "How do you do, Mr. Bane.

"I am Edna May Fitzgerald, only daughter of Bruce Fitzgerald, owner of the Triple-F—or what's left of it."

Speed skidded a rasher of bacon onto her tin plate. "That sounds precarious. Has the land been evaporating, or the stock?"

She nibbled at the bacon with obvious approval. "The stock, up to now. But, if we don't stop this rustling soon, the land will go, too. The bank that made our loan says we're no longer a good risk. Understand please, I'm not hinting when I mention rustlers. I now don't believe you're anything like that."

"Thanks; and you're the second person that's accused and acquitted me just like that, this morning. Shows I bear close inspection."

Her finely-penciled brows arched. "Some other person got after you this morning?"

When Speed told her about the boy, she received the information with mingled amusement and annoyance. "That's my only brother, Bobbie, drat the brat! I was out searching for him when I encountered you. He went for a ride, early, and after he had gone Dad missed his new six and couldn't locate his boots. When I get my hands on that young gentleman, I'll—

"No, I suppose I won't, either. After all, he's heard of nothing but rustlers, lately, so he's started out to pot a few of them."

"Some kid," Speed enthused. "Now go ahead and tell me what all this stuff regarding rustlers is about."

She shook her head, took another sip of coffee, rose and shook out her skirts. "I'm sorry, but I must ask you to excuse me. After all, I came out after Bobbie, so I'd better be finding him. Also, Dad's over east there, searching too. I must find him and tell him Bobbie has been

"Anyway, our troubles at the ranch would be of no interest to a person who is riding through."

"Was riding through," he corrected her, then went on, barzenly: "In the last half hour, I've changed my mind. Yes, sir-ee, I've decided to live and die, right on this range.

"If the Triple-F could make room for a top hand, I—"

To his surprise, she grew inexplicably agitated. "No-no! You musn't even think of trying a thing like that!"

He caught up his saddle and bridle and whistled for his horse. "Anyway, I can help you hunt the youngster, and—"

"You mustn't think of doing that, either. It might mean your death to even be seen with me."

"Well, it'll mean my death if I'm never seen with you, so—"

"Don't discuss it further, please." She swung up on the filly, then leaned down to extend her slender hand. For just a second, it responded to the grip of his own firm palm. Then she gently worked it free, reined the filly around, gave her her head and skimmed away in the direction the boy had taken. After the grey hat had bobbed through the sea of waving sage for a time before disappearing among scattered cedars on the eastern decline, Speed started to resume breakfast, but found he wasn't hungry, after all. "There's a gossipy little cowtown somewheres in this neighborhood, of course," he decided, after a time. "I'm going to ramble around and hit onto it and find out what all this is about."

Packing his dunnage hurriedly, he saddled his big-boned gelding and jogged off. Not knowing which way to go, he turned into the first dim bridlepath he struck, followed it till it joined a plainer one, a half-here.

mile or so from camp. He had gone no more than a hundred yards on the new trail when a rifle barked angrily somewhere among the washes that now lay to northward of him, and the slug whistled so close to his ear that he felt the suck of it.

BOILING mad through and through, Speed threw his muscular body out of saddle and jerked his saddlegun free of its sheath in the skirts. A second bullet whined past him as he caught a fleeting glimpse of a man's head and shoulders in a wash some distance away. Grimly Speed pumped lead toward the spot, circling to come in on the dry-gulcher from the rear.

The head and shoulders disappeared, and the rifle grew silent. Only the smoke haze spiraling lazily up to thin to nothingness in the light, still air, marked the killer's location. Suspecting a trap, Speed ran northward till he struck a lateral gully to get cover. Following it, he worked his way eastward when hoofbeats sounded some distance up the other drain, receding rapidly northward.

Still fighting mad, Speed swore disgustedly. "Hell of a country! The ones who don't hold me up, crack down on me without warning! If I could only get a fair shot at that gulcher, I'd feel like a man again!"

Refilling the magazine, he raced to the gruella, swung up, scoured the washes on a keen gallop. Several times he detected the sound of pounding hoofbeats at a distance, and once he caught a momentary glimpse of a big, free-going paint horse surging over a low ridge, with his rider bent low over the horn, feeding steel and whang leather to his straining mount. Speed had only time to note that he was slender, a little stoop-shouldered and was clad in what appeared to be grey jeans britches and checked gingham skirt. Though he knew it would be futile at the distance, Speed took a snap shot at the fleeting target as the paint horse whipped over the little ridge, almost taking it in his stride. A puff of white rock dust on the crest of the ridge told that the slug had fallen but little short.

Returning to the trail, Speed turned Buck eastward and jogged toward the little cowtown he now could see nestling against a hill on the far side of a willow-fringed creek. Just after he had forded the shallow stream, he met a hunched, grey-bearded rider who gave him a somewhat inquisitive sideglance as they were about to pass.

Speed reined in, whereupon the other stopped also, twisting sidewise in saddle to face him. "Well," Speed said, "go ahead and do your do. If you're going to hold me up, say the fatal words. If you're going to line sights on me, don't wait and crawl into a gulley."

"Hell, I ain't goin' to do neither of them things," the other said, disgustedly. "I don't b'long to th' wild bunch; I'm th' mail carrier. You must be a jump galoot."

"Glad to meet up with you," Speed enthused, extending a hand which the other shook with a mystified air. "I'm the more tickled because you seem to be the only human in this man's country that ain't out gunning for me."

Speed rode on, leaving the old man scratching his shaggy head and staring after him. Ten minutes later, the gruella headed into the narrow main street of a neat little cowtown which was identified when he read the words, SMOKY HILL HOTEL emblazoned along the cornice of a two-story building, with a feedlot at-

tached, that stood on the west side of the street. He turned Buck into the feedlot, groomed and fed him, left his gear in the musty little office, and cut diagonally across the sandy, hoof-cupped street toward a low, false-fronted building that was labeled, GRAND PALACE SALOON, in faded letters above the sagging wooden awning.

Infromation was what Speed sought, and he knew well that no one in any day or anywhere ever was better qualified to supply it than the old-time cowtown bartender, a part of whose duty it was to listen more or less patiently while inebriated ranchers and punchers related their triumphs and told their troubles.

Chapter II

MORE GUNSMOKE

SPEED stopped on the walk in front of the Grand Palace, his attention attracted by a horse that stood among the half-dozen sweaty-backed cowponies that stamped flies at the hitchrail. It was a big paint, flat boned, close ribbed, deep chested. From nose to tail it was crusted with a dried paste of mingled sweat and dust—a portion of the latter being white rock dust.

zSpeed had stepped from the walk to look the animal over more closely when a young fellow in flashy range attire came out of the saloon and spoke crisply. "Anything 'bout that hawse that yuh think needs fixin', Waddy?"

Speed had stepped from the walk crown to sole. He was not over twenty, slender, pallid, dark haired. His hands and feet were unusually small, and his ascetic face with its thin mouth and receding chin showed a mental weakness that matched his physique well. His picturated batwing chaps and wide holstered belt with it heavy sixes swung low made him look even more unimposing than he would have otherwise. Speed instinctively compared him with the little boy playing grown-up, he had met out on the knoll.

Then Speed had another thought —a mental picture of a big paint horse whipping over a ridge, in the saddle a slender, slightly stooped rider who had shot from a gulley, but wouldn't stand up to a man. "I reckon it's a free country—in a way—so a man's got the right to look at what he damn pleases," he answered, as crisply as the other had spoken. "I didn't handle the hawse any.

"Another thing I might mention, Mister. That word "waddy" is used a little carelessly by story writers and others who don't know that a waddy is a prairie vagabond—a cheap, no-'count saddle tramp."

"Well, I called you that," the other came back, belligerently. "Maybe you want to do something about it."

"I'll think that over while I lace me up a smoke." Speed told him, evenly. "If I decide to bash your nose in, I'll let you know before I smack you."

The other stepped to the edge of the walk, scowling blackly. "Speaking of smackin' people, I gotta big mind to smack you, 'thout waitin' for nothin'."

Speed looked the thin frame over contempteously. "Mister, if you smack me and I ever find it out, I'm going to be real humiliated."

Somebody inside the saloon chuckled hoarsely. The youth flushed a fiery red, then paled with fighting fury. Leaping pantherishly, he cleared the walk and landed toe to toe with the imperturbed puncher bringing his right fist around in a full handed swing that was astonishingly dynamic for one of his slight build.

Caught by surprise, having no time to give back before the blow, Speed stepped inside it. As the other's fist flailed around to hammer his left shoulderblade, he pistoned his left into the youth's thin chest to stop him, then loosed a mighty open-handed wallop that sent the lighter man pinwheeling into the gutter.

"Better behave nice when you get up," Speed advised helpfully as his adversary scrambled to his feet. "If you keep on whanging at me I may lose my temper and use my fist on you. If I did, I'd never get over being ashamed of myself."

UPRIGHT again now, the other man turned ashen faced and shaky—a coward, dangerous because he was a coward. Locking eyes with him, Speed saw the glint of desperate resolve in his shifty eyes, saw his shoulder twitch and his feet shuffle as he hunched for the draw which he intended to be a surprise. He checked his impulse and turned, white-faced, panting with excitement when a heavy, wheezing voice interposed from somewhere back of Speed:

"Hey! What's eatin' on yuh two splayeyed rannyhans?

"Back up there, Stone, an' keep yur paw away from yur hardware!"

"But he was sizin' my hawse up, an' I think he's a rustler!"

"To hell with what yuh think. I'll do th' thinkin' in this man's town, fur a while yet. Just each back in there an' stay put till I look this pilgrim over a little."

Speed made a quick scrutiny of the big, greasy looking man who had ridden his flea-bitten grey up while they had been jowering. He was past middle age, so paunchy that his midsection was dented by the saddle horn. He had a suety face, adorned by shrewd little grey eyes that were barely discernible between his near-closed lids. His gingham shirt was stuck to his sweaty body, and his hat and breeches were as time-stained as his frayed boots. The Sheriff's star on his leathern suspenders accounted for his air of authority. Having a barrel at least twelve inches long, the plain-butted six that swung at his hip did not look out of proportion to his immense bulk. Back of him was a big-nosed man also wearing a star, and Speed assumed that he was a deputy.

After the man he had addressed as Stone had gone back inside, muttering protestations as he went, the officer slitted his eyes at Speed. "Where yuh ridin' from?"

"Texas."

"Where to?"

"Probably stop here. The folks around here appear so interested in me. Every citizen turns out to meet me—with a gun."

"Gotta job?"

"No."

"Humph! Git one, then."

"Who says I have to?"

"Joe Pate—that's me. Bein's yuh're a stranger, I'm tellin' yuh to git a job and kinda hug it fur a while till we know yuh better. If yuh're still loafin' aroun' town at this time tomorrow, I'll jug yuh.

"C'mon, Bill. We gotta be hittin' th' trail if we wanta be back afore sundown."

As the sheriff started off, he raised his voice to bawl at a short, red-headed man lolling against an awing post before the postoffice, across the street. "Hey, Ed! Jim Stone an' this hombre is lookin' red-eyed at each other! If they git gunny, knock hell out of 'em an' slap 'em in th' same house! If they show fight, deputize th' hull damn town, if yuh hafta!"

WHILE the deputy called Ed strolled across the street and inside, Speed cooly finished his inspection of the big horse, even picking up a forefoot. After noting that the shoe was calked, front and rear, he measured it by spanning it with his hand, then, instead of going into the saloon, he went back to the feedlot, saddled Buck, galloped back out to the washes, where he puttered about for the better part of an hour before returning to town. After stalling the gruella for the second time, he went directly to the Grand Palace, stopping on the walk to size the place up over the shutter door.

It was a typical cowtown booze dispensary of the frontier type. No brass grills, no tall mirrors. A stout oaken bar, plainly finished, but neatly kept. Two pool tables and a billiard table in the rear. An enormous ice-box at the end of the bar. The expected litter of sawdust on the floor. A modern touch was an ornate cash register on a shelf back of the cigar counter.

The day still being young, but a half-dozen men were in the place. Ed and young Stone were playing bottle pool at the table farthest from the front. Two punchers were lolling against the bar, drinking and chaffing. A moocher dozed up front with his chair tilted back against the wall. An iron grey rancher was reading a newspaper spread before him on the cigar case.

Back of the bar, a chuffy-bodied man with a round, moonlike face and a shiny bald head was wiping glasses and stowing them in glittering pyramids on the backbar.

A good, clean joint, Speed decided. When he pushed through the shutter, the moocher's chairlegs struck the floor as he awakened hopefully. All the others quit what they were doing to stare at him so curiously that his already ragged-edged temper flared. "Name's Speed Bane," he announced, dryly. "Nothing else about me is anybody's damn business.

"Do I hear any remarks?"

Back at the pooltable, Young Stone piped some sort of answer in his thin, high-pitched voice, subsiding when Ed growled a warning.

"I was speakin' to the menfolks—the white men, at that," Speed remarked in a detached way.

Nobody stirred or spoke.

Speed crossed to the bar and tossed a bill on it. "That being the case, I'm buying a drink—several of them. Pour 'em till that money is used up, Barkeep."

Still nobody spoke, but everybody drank—not excepting Young Stone, who already was nicely in his cups. After they had swigged the whiskey the barkeeper waddled to take back to them, Ed caught his charge by the arm and led him out through the back door. A minute later, Speed saw Ed steer him to the paint horse and

When Ed came back in, he lined up start him northward up the street. beside Speed, grinning sociably. "Stone's drunk," he said, apologetically, then shook his head. "I'm figgerin' that boy's gonna keep right keepin' on till somebody feels obleeged to knock him off. He never would have locked horns with yuh but he seen Pate an' Bill comin'. He wanted to make a gran'-stan' play—slap yuh one an' then git pulled off fore yuh could slap him.

"Big trouble with him is, he's a spoilt kid. His dad, ol' Sam Stone—Whetstone, th' boys calls him—owns about half th' country, an' has got mortgages on th' biggest part of t'other half. Th' kid alluz is in a rukus of some kind, an' Old Whetstone takes his part, invariably.

"Th' worst of it is that Whetstone's a go-gittin' heller on wheels. Shoot at th' drop of th' hat an' drop it hissel. Don't know what it is to be man-shy. He's a mite faster than greased telepathy with a six, an' don't shoot just to hear th' gun bark, neither."

The deputy dropped his voice to a confidential tone: "You ridin' for th' Triple-F outfit?"

"Why, no. Never have ridden for anybody, here."

Ed shook his head in obvious puzzlement. "Don't see what made him git on th' prod with you, then."

Speed started to explain that he had been on the Triple-F that morning, and had been dry-gulched when he left, but he thought better of it. Instead, he asked a question. "Seems from what you say this Stone party isn't in love with the Triple-F folks. What's the trouble, fence war?"

"Yes, an' no."

"Water fight?"

"No, an' yes."

"Shoot the straight dope. I'm listening."

"Shootin' dammit, but don't let Pate know that I gossipped. He don't take sides nur talk 'bout nobody, an' he makes me keep neutral, too.

"Them two ranches has gotta fence war an' a water fight, but th' cold fact about that Triple-F—Boxed-S feud is that Jim Stone got stuck on ol' Bruce Fitzgerald's gal, an' she headed him back home. As per usual, Whetstone took his boy's part, an' lit on ol' Bruce, who tole him p'intedly to go straight to hell.

"He didn't go to hell, but he brung condensed hell right up here to the Smoky Hill range. That gal of Fitzgerald's was th' first thing Young Jim Stone ever wanted in his life that he didn't git. An' his pappy couldn't git 'er fur him.

"That's been almost two years ago, and th' war's on yet."

Speed was all ears. "And who's getting the best of it?"

ED SPAT disgustedly into the sawdust at their feet. "Hell! They's nothin' to it. Whetstone's got ol' Bruce by th' tail an' a downhill pull."

"That bad?"

"Just that bad. Fitzgerald has lost so many punchers by lead poison that he ain't hirin' no help no more. Figgers it's just plain murder to ask a man to ride for him.

"All they is left of his ol' bunch is a buck-kneed ol' corral boss called Slim Chance, an' a squinty-eyed cook knowed as Greasy. A blinky cook an' a spavined corral boss ain't much good when yuh ain't got nothin' to corral an' nobody to cook fur.

"Ol' Fitzgerald an' th' gal can't watch th' rustlers off their stock; so they're 'bout all in. Short of cash, an' th' bank won't back 'em no more, with th' rustlers workin' on 'em so. Turned Fitzgerald down for a measley thousand, last week. Money he needed for winter feed, bein's he ain't got help to put up enough hay."

"You say rustlers are working on the Triple-F stuff, anybody else around here losing cows?"

"Shore thing. Th' Boxed-S has lost a heap, too; but havin' plenty of riders, Whetstone's better fixed to take care of his stuff. They ain't been nicked much, lately.

"Well, I reckon I better ease over to the office and wrangle th' books fur a while. Pate always shoves that damn job off onto me.

"If ol' Whetstone shows up, watch him close. He's plumb venomous."

"How will I know him when I see him?"

"That's easy. Just take Young Jim an' square his jaw an' tan his hide

an' put a few grey hairs on him an' stuff some real he-man guts inta him an' give him a temper like a grizzly with a sore paw. That'll make ol' Whetstone."

AFTER the deputy had clumped out, Speed loafed, drank sparingly, worked up an acquaintanceship with the proprietor-bartender, whose named proved to be Steuffenhoffer—called "Dutch" for short. "Pate iss one tamn goodt sheriff, I tells me you," Dutch said, when Speed steered the conversation around to the officers. "He iss one dirty looker, but he safes the country a lot uff moneys."

Speed sipped at his beer. "How's that?"

"Py golly, he gits overpoweret a plendty, dot's how."

"I don't get you."

Dutch gestured energetically with his bar towel. "You see, ven he ketches a bad man, he pudts him in chail, alretty. Den, ven night comes, a mob comes too, andt overpowers Pate an' takes der brizner from der chail oudt an' hangs him vonce. I bedt you mein life Pate's two deputies helps do der overpowering.

"Dot's how he safes der county moneys. He's been sheriff ten year, an' vee neffer hadt to summons a chury for one murder or rustler trial, yet."

"Yeh, but why doesn't he clean up the range—catch those rustlers who are picking Fitzgerald's bones, for instance?"

"Dot's difference. Pate keeps order in town, andt giffs floaters hell. But he lets der ranchers fight der own tamn fights. Dot's his system andt he sticks to idt. Vell den, dot rustling oudt at Fitzgerald's aindt chust rustling. It's a tamn fight.

"Unter der hat, I don't mindt telling you dat Pate likes ol' man Fitzgerald a plenty, budt he follows his system andt—

"Er—ahem! Vott iss idt you say you vant?"

THE front end of the long, low-ceiled, booze-stunk room had become suddenly silent, and someone there coughed high in his constricted throat as a nervous man does when danger threatens. The silence spread toward the rear, and the entire room became so still that the metronomic ticking of the stolid-faced wall clock over the backbar sounded loud and insistent.

Dutch Steuffenhoffer's moonlike face became suddenly dewed with sweat, and he mumbled some sort of warning as he set out a bottle of beer, accompanying it with a whiskey glass by error.

A puncher next to Speed nudged his cup companion in the ribs, and the two lounged across to join the fringe of men already ranged against the wall.

Alone now, Speed shifted position to bring his right hip away from the bar and turned lazily to face the front. It was the elder Stone, he knew at a glance.

The withy bodied old rancher had stopped just inside the shutter searching the now comfortably packed room with darting black eyes that seemed to see everything, rest on nothing. His sharp, creased face was pinched with excitement as he stood, feet spread, body hunched, hands hanging near his hips, the fingers crooked like the talons of an eagle. When the movement of the two punchers unscreened Speed, he took a shuffling step forward, scarcely raising his feet from the floor, and snarled, "You the onregenerate nomber that hit my boy?"

"I didn't exactly hit him," Speed answered. "I just slapped him."

Whetstone took another skidding step forward, his eyes blazing. "Oh, so you just slapped him, eh? An' him with his jaw swole up like a buffler's hump."

"I only slapped him," Speed repeated, patiently, fastening his gaze on the talonlike hands. "I didn't wanta hit a shitepoke shanked, shaky jawed galoot that don't look like he's more than half human."

Then tension broke. His face a mask of fury, Whetstone struck at his hip and his gun seemed to leap from the leather to meet his clawing hand.

The heavy six tilted up, swung an inch, then clattered against the cigarcase and spun out of reach behind its owner when Speed's right-hand gun roared, filling the room with blaring echoes and setting the pyramided glasses on the backbar a-tingle.

Another silence followed—the silence that accompanies a surprise too great to be denoted by words. Whetstone stood stupidly rubbing his numbed right hand with his left one, a dazed look on his weather-beaten face. Along the wall, the others gaped at Speed as men look at some rare and formidable animal.

It was Dutch Steuffenhoofer who drew in his breath with a sharp hiss and expelled it with a toothy whistle: "Fee-o-o! I iss seeing dings vat aindt!

"Vetstone has reach for hiss gun, alretty, ven der odder feller iss nodt! Den der odder feller shoots alretty pefore Vetstone is shoot!

"Dot iss funy. Vetstone iss der fastest man in der vorldt mit a gun, budt der odder feller is faster dan dat, alretty.

"Py tamn, vé seen it, but it ish nodt so. I feels like mein headt was took away midt surprise, andt—"

The sidewalk outside had creaked beneath a ponderous tread. Now Sheriff Pate rammed through the shutter, his grating voice fairly shaking the building: "Now what th' hell's up? Hell's delight, it 'pears I can't turn my back 'thout havin' some two galoots git on th' prod an' start in massycreein' each other!

"Pick that hawglaig up an' fan it fur home so fast yur shirt-tail buzzes, Whetstone! Remember, when I say pick it up an' fan it I mean fur yuh to slope home hell-bent fur breakfast!"

SHAKING with rage, Whetstone retrieved his six from the sawdust, and slipped it into its holster slowly, reluctantly, as though he was itching to use it, instead. His burning gaze on Speed, his teeth hardly parted as he clipped a final threat: "I'll git yuh fur doin' that, damn yuh."

"Well, you'd have got me if I hadn't done it, damn you," Speed shot back as the rancher bolted through the shutter as though fearful he wouldn't be able to restrain himself if he stayed longer.

Pate lumbered down the room to stop and lay a heavy hand on Speed's shoulder. "I'm 'restin' yuh in th' name of th' law, feller," he wheezed, drawing his long six with his free hand and jammed it against the surprised puncher's side. Coming through the shutter, guns drawn, Ed and Bill took station one each side of their chief.

"Arrest, hell!" Speed protested, as a mutter arose in the crowd. "Every man here will tell you that I had to shoot or I'd have been killed. At that, I let him fill his hand first, and I didn't damage anything but the gun."

"All off the subject, feller," Pate said placidly. "I ain't throwin' a loop on yur fur gunnin' Whetstone a lit-

tle. I'm juggin' yuh fur murder—double-geared, cold-blooded dry-gulchin'."

"The hell you are! And who did I dry-gulch?"

"Yuh orter know," Pate wheezed, darkly. "Refreshin' yur mem'ry, though, I'm oratin' that ol' Bruce Fitzgerald was gulched up there this side the big knoll some time this forenoon. He ain't dead yet, but they figger he soon will be.

"You're it, Mister. Don't even wink while I uncinch yur belt an' frisk yuh fur hid weapons!'

For fleeting instant, Speed braced himself to resist. Then he thought better of it and relaxed. "Go ahead then, you elephant-eared damn fool. After all, nearly every other human I've met up with around here has gunned me more or less and cussed me in proportion; so why not you?"

"Make chin music whilst yuh kin," Pate said, phlegmatically. "I should't be surprised much if yur talkin' 'ud be stopped pretty soon now."

Chapter III

MINUTES TO GO!

JAILING Speed Bane furnished rather an impressive spectacle for the throng of inquisitive townfolk who appeared miraculously when Pate led the way across the street, his big gun in hand. Behind him marched Speed, flanked by the two deputies with drawn sixes. "Ought'n't we to have a little music and a speech by the mayor?" Speed asked dryly, when the sheriff stopped before a low-roofed stone building on the rear of the lot next to the feedlot.

Pate grunted, unlocked the door and stood aside to usher his prisoner into the building's single room, which proved to be his office and sleeping quarters, as well as the jail.

On one side of the square room, were three cagelike cells of crossed bars that reached from floor to ceiling. By the opposite wall was a bunk, a pine desk, a swivel chair and a couple of stools. Leaned against it were several rifles, and an assortment of fishing rods. Above the cluttered desk was a shelf holding a fly-specked clock, a frayed law book of some sort, a big bottle of horse linement and other odds and ends. The blankets on the bunk looked none too clean, and the floor and furniture was sadly in need of dusting. Even the wall 'phone looked greasy and grimy.

The sheriff piloted his prisoner into the middle cell, locked the steel door, shook it to make certain that it was locked, then tossed the enormous key on the desk, hung Speed's gunbelt on a peg by the door and eased his big, sweaty body into the squeaking swivelchair. Ed and Bill tramped out, with instructions to "ooze out to th' Triple-F an' take a look-see, all aroun'."

After the deputies had gone, Pate swung the swivel to face Speed's cell and leaned back comfortably, clasping his big hands across his ample paunch and slitting his small eyes at his prisoner, speculatively. "Got anything to say fur yurself?" he asked, in his thick, asthmatic voice.

"Not a damn thing," Speed snapped. "It would do no good to talk to an over-stuffed, gopher-voiced jughead who jails a man just because he's a stranger."

"Might help if yuh answered a few plain questions," Pate suggested, placidly. "Th' way things is, it looks pretty bad fur yuh. 'Course, yuh kin suit yurself 'bout palaverin'. I never third-degree a ranny none. Also it's my duty to warn yuh that anything yuh say may be used ag'in yuh."

"Use it and be damned," Speed

told him shortly. "Go ahead and shoot your silly questions. I'll answer when I see fit."

"Awright then, if I onderstood yuh right, yuh told me yuh come from down Texas way, headin' fur th' Black Hills. Howsonever, yuh really hit this town from th' northwest, as yur sign shows plenty plain."

"I changed my mind."

"Why?"

Speed experienced a mild shock when he searched his mind for the answer and found that a coppery head and a pair of deep violet eyes had altered his plans. An explanation of that sort would sound silly, even if he cared to make it, which he didn't. He remained silent.

Pate waited patiently for a time. Then the springs of the swivel-chair squealed their protest when he tilted his lardy body forward to see his prisoner more directly. "Ol' Fitzgerald was gulched a little east and north of where yuh camped on that knoll las' night. Yur sign shows that yuh rid east off that knoll, then left saddle an' scouted around' afoot. Then yuh hit leather ag'in an' rid like hell a-beatin' tanbark down amongst them washes. Also, yur sign shows—"

"Wait a second. If you're so damn alert, maybe you found some other fellows' sign up there."

"Uh-huh. Jim was there, huntin' fur some stray saddlers. That's nawthin' onusual fur Jim, so he don't have a lot to explain. But it's plumb onusual fur a strange hombre who is headed fur th' Black Hills to stop an' spend th' best part of half a day scallyhootin' an' messin' arou' 'mongst them washes.

"'Nother thing that'll take a lotta explainin' is that Fitzgerald was shot with a 38'. Yur saddlegun's that size. It's dirty, an' they's one shell missin' from th' magazine. Yuh shot that gun this mornin'—twict if yuh carry a shell in th' chamber, an' onct if you don't."

SPEED remembered that he had shot the gun at the gulcher but once after reloading it. He was starting to explain that when the sheriff waved a flabby hand. "Hold it till I git through. Yuh met ol' Lucas, th' mail carrier, just after yuh come outa them washes, an' he tells me yuh was plumb jump—like a gulcher who expects to be ketched. Fact is, yuh told him yuh expected him to hold yuh up or crack down on yuh."

Pate leaned back again and the small eyes viewed the specked ceiling speculatively. "That's th' state's case, Mister. If they's a defense, I'm advisin' that yuh produce it, plenty pronto. Right now, it looks like yuh been aroun' here rustlin' maybe fur weeks. Follorin' that line, yuh was after beef when Fitzgerald run inta yuh, so yuh cracked down on him.

"I say that's th' way th' thing looks as she stands. If they's ary other side to it, yuh better be spittin' it out."

"I'll do that to the jury. No use to talk to you."

Pate sighed and rose heavily to drink noisily from the water cooler. After two draughts he gestured impressivly with the rusty tin dipper. "Onct more I'm advisin' yuh that yuh say yur say now."

Something ominous in the sheriff's manner warned Speed to talk, but his patience had been exhausted by the series of troubles he had encountered in and about Smoky Hill. When he remained silent, the sheriff hung the dipper on its nail, tilted on his battered brown hat, turned the knob of the spring lock of the outer door and lumbered out, snapping the lock be-

hind him. As he tramped heavily away, each of his slow, plodding footsteps sounded somehow like a toll of doom.

Obsessed by a vague foreboding, Speed shrugged it off for the time being, built a cigaret and lay down on the musty bunk at the back of his cell to listen to the street noises that wafted through the high windows, and curse Smoky Hill and its citizens —particularily its sheriff—at intervals. He still lay there at early sunset when Ed and Bill came in, the former bringing Speed's supper of grass steak, potatoes, beans and coffee.

THERE was a distinct difference in the attitude of the two deputies toward the suspect. Bill was crusty, short-spoken, seemingly glad that Speed was where he was. He stood with gun drawn while Ed unlocked the cell and passed the supper in, saying apologetically, "Best I could hustle. If yuh want drinks or smokes, I'll go fetch 'em."

After Speed had eaten, and Ed had retrieved the dishes—again with Bill's guns guarding him—he relocked the door and again tossed the ring of keys to the desk top. "How's Fitzgerald? Speed asked, as they were preparing to depart.

"Plenty bad," Bill growled, as though he enjoyed giving that information. "Doc says that a chunk of his brass suspender buckle was jammed inta th' hole in his chest. It kep' th' slug from goin' deep, but if blood pizen sets in—which it's almost shore to do—he ain't got no more chanct than a slick-eared yearlin' in a blizzard."

"He's a tough ol' lobo, though," Ed consoled, awkwardly. "He may fool Doc an' make th' hill, after all." He looked at the littered floor and spoke to Bill. "Yuh go 'head over to th' Grand Palace. I'll be 'long soon's I rid this boar's nest up a little."

Bill hesitated, then went out, growling a caution not to "let that damn gulcher put anything over."

"Sweet-dispositioned mule, that pard of yours," Speed remarked, as Ed commenced raising a dustcloud with the broom he had caught up.

"Kinda sawtoothy, fur a fact," Ed admitted.

Somehow, the little deputy's kindliness affected Speed more strongly than the hostile attitude of the other deputy. It was in accord with the practice of sheriffs and jailers everywhere, who feed a condemned man sumptuously on the eve of his execution.

With that thought, Speed felt his blood chill and his muscles grow rigid temporarily as if they had braced to meet a great emergency. It had brought back to him Dutch Steuffenhoffer's statement—a statement he had overlooked since his arrest.

The saloonkeeper had boasted that Pate saved the county's money by allowing himself to be "overpowered"—even arranged to have himself "overpowered"—when satisfied in his own mind that a transient prisoner was guilty.

Like a flash, the thought followed that Pate had mildly urged Speed to state his defense, "plenty pronto" instead of waiting to place it before a jury.

The jury! As well as he knew he was alive, Speed knew that there would be no jury. Pate's heavy judicial attitude, Bill's triumphant air, good natured Ed's awkwardly expressed sympathy all pointed to a lynching.

How? When? By whom? Courageous as he was, Speed had to steel

himself to speak calmly when he asked as casually as possible, "What do you reckon will be the next step in my case, Ed?"

Ed's busy broom stopped swishing and he leaned on its handle for a time, gazing abstractedly at the windrow of litter he had made. Finally he shook his fiery head uncommunicatively. "I ain't sayin'. Fact is, me an' Bill's got standin' orders from Pate not to give no infurmation to prizners."

Fishing patiently for information, Speed threw out a feeler. "Oh well, I can wait and tell my troubles to the jury."

Ed swept away for a time, then leaned his broom against the wall and stepped close to the cell to drop his voice almost to a whisper. "I like yuh, feller. What's more, after hearin' 'bout what yuh told Pate, I figger a hull lotta things that's took place aroun' here could be—er—

"Well, dammit, yuh see I give my word never to tell a prizner nothin' an' that goes. I'm resignin' this damn job th' first of th' month, but, so long as I wear a star I'll mind th' boss." He remained thoughtful for a moment then added, as though prompted by a sudden decision, "I'll say this, though. I just remembered that I gotta phone a feller. I'm orderin' yuh to stuff yur socks inta yur ears while I talk; but, if yuh don't do it, I can't help it."

Ed went to the 'phone, rang a number. Speed experienced a chilly sensation in the pit of his stomach as he listened to the one-sided conversation.

"That you Jake? . . . This is Ed Seale . . . Thought I'd call yuh an' give you th' dope . . . Yeh, th' party's on . . . Uh-huh, t'night at—well, say ten o'clock, if th' boys is all here by then . . . Yeh, they meet at th' saloon . . . Bill is gonna rod th' party . . . Nope, I don't reckon I'll be there . . . Ain't feelin' right frisky, an' I'm gonna ask Pate to let me off.

"Uh-huh . . . Uh-huh . . . Well, so long."

Hanging the receiver up, Ed turned slowly away from the 'phone and picked up his broom. Respecting the deputy's position, Speed made no comment. After finishing his work, Ed came to the cell and thrust a calloused hand through the bars. Speed gripped it silently. It was a farewell, an expression of sympathy and regret. "Well, so long, old hawse," Speed said gravely. "You're one white hombre, and, if luck should break, and I get out of here, I'll put in the rest of my life trying to get even with you."

Ed turned on the threshold as if to speak, then waved a hand and left, slamming the door behind hurriedly. Speed knew that the good-hearted fellow was afraid to say a word for fear he would say too much.

HIS own words, "if I ever get out of here" seemed to echo hollowly in Speed's ears. He had to get out, and at once. Hastily he tried the bars, searched the cell for anything that might be utilized as a tool, even jerked the sour-smelling mattress off the bunk and tried to tear the steel frame of the bunk apart with his hands. Desperate, he snapped the heavy blade of his jackknife in a frantic effort to dent the steel plate that protected the rear wall of his cage.

No use. Baffled, and on the verge of getting jittery, he sat down on the edge of the bunk and forced himself to do some cool thinking, while the dusk clamped down over the quiet little cowtown and the crowd of day shoppers commenced wheel-

ing and saddling away to their homes on the ranches, leaving the business block to the frolicking punchers and ranchers who had come to town to play as well as to trade. Speed thought bitterly of the manner in which they would play.

Seven o'clock! Three hours yet! Bill came in, lighted a smoky-globed bracket lamp above the desk, shook the cell door, glowering in at the prisoner. He smelled strongly of bad whiskey, and his furrowed face was flushed with suppressed excitement. Neither he nor Speed spoke. After he had gone, Speed worked on the steel framework of the bunk again, in a futile effort to get it apart and secure a lever. Probably the lever would have been insufficient had he gotten it, but he had to try.

Eight o'clock. Two hours left! The tide of humanity flowing out of town ebbed, and a new current flowed the other way. By ones and twos and groups horsemen rode in to line their broncs along the far side of the street and clump into the saloon and poolhall—the only two places left open in town, with the exception of the hotel and feedlot. Speed paced the narrow confines of his cell till Ed shambled in, bringing a bottle of cold beer and a cigar and leaving hurriedly after he had passed them through the bars.

When Speed asked to see Pate, ready now to tell his side of the story, Ed shook his head. "He's outa town. He won't be back till 'bout ten." That meant that Pate would hit town just in time to be "overpowered." By then, the mob spirit would be fuming hotly, and no defense would be heard.

Nine o'clock. An hour remaining! The influx of punchers and ranchers ceased, and Speed could hear sounds of merriment across the street—the light click of pool balls and the clump of the players' feet as they paraded around the tables; the continuous squeak of the shutter door of the saloon and the clink of glasses and buzz of conversation inside. A burst of ribald song, hearty guffaws—other outstanding omens that a Roman holiday was in the making. Ed brought another small bottle of beer and a bottle of whiskey, both of which Speed tossed on the bunk untouched as soon as the deputy had gone. Then he ground his even teeth in exasperation as he glared impotently at the keyring that lay in plain sight on the pine desk, but might as well have been at the North Pole. His holstered belt still hanging by the wall, was another tantalizing sight that set him fairly a-tremble with fighting rage.

Nine-thirty! But minutes to go now!

Nine-forty! The trampling of many feet along the walk from the poolhall to the saloon told that the hall was closed and the crowd was assembling at Steuffenhoffer's. Someone came to the door of the jail, shook it, and left. Some inebriated citizen who had gotten his dates mixed, probably.

Nine-fifty! A scant ten minutes left. Perhaps a minute or two more.

A pony loped down Main street, going from north to south. Speed noted in a detached way that it turned the hotel corner, entered the side street, then turned northward up the alley. "Another drunk, I reckon," he decided, disgustedly. "Seems like they can't even hold a decent necktie party, but have to get stewed and—"

Speed jammed his breast against the bars, listening intently, and in puzzlement. The horse checked its speed, came so close to the south

wall of the jail that its rider's stirrup raked the stone wall. His faculties keyed to top tension, Speed heard it stop beneath one of the high windows. Leather squeaked as the rider shifted position in a queer way. The next moment Speed almost forgot that death—a dog's death—was but minutes away, so great was his surprise.

A chubby, grimy hand had come into the light, grasping a bar of the high window. There was a clawing sound, a succession of subdued grunts.

Then a cherubic freckled face appeared against the bars of the window and the flutelike voice of Bobbie Fitzgerald floated in. "'Lo, Pardner! Sis sent me in to find out if yuh was alright, an' if there's anything we can do for yuh."

Chapter IV

HOOFBEATS IN THE NIGHT

A WAVE of supreme exultation swept over the condemned man. The girl was on his side! For the first time, it was brought home to him that, with her father down, she was out there trying to hold the ranch together, aided only by little Bobbie and a pair of frayed, has-been punchers. Yet she found time to extend sympathy, if nothing else.

"Thanks, old pal," he chirped cheerily to big-eyed worshipped Bobbie. "Tell Sis I sure thank her for her interest—you too, old man."

"Oh, that's all right," Bobbie assured him, loftily. "If there's anything you want, say so. We white men gotta stick together."

Was there anything he wanted? Considering the question bitterly, he found himself staring at the ring of keys, noting for the first time exactly how they lay. Ed had tossed the bunch carelessly on the desk, and it had skidded till it struck the wall. A little east of the desk, and near the window was the clutter of fishpoles. Dangling from one of these was a short length of line that had become unwrapped, and, by a miracle, the keys had struck it, possibly—even probably—entangling the keys in the hook.

Speed's searching mind did a flip-flop, producing a big idea, not a nebulous thought that grew gradually but a plan that leaped into view, complete and intact. There were signs of activity over at the saloon now, but there must be no hurry. The keys were heavy and the cord was light. A jerk would ruin everything. He spoke coolly:

"Coming to think of it, old Pard, there is something I want. The keys on that desk are tangled in the hook of that fishpole—the cane one with the cracked end.

"Yeh, that's the one. Steady now. Lift it till the line tightens, then swing it till I can reach it.

"That's it. . . . Easy now. . . . Be careful not to hook it into that lamp bracket. . . . Now you're coming on. . . . Careful. . . . Take your time. . . . Just an inch or two more so I can—

"Fine work, old socks! I got it!"

"Somebody's comin'," Bobbie piped, and Speed heard him slide from the window into saddle.

"Git!" Speed snapped at him, busy working the key into the lock.

His heart seemed to skip a beat then race madly when he heard gravel grind beneath heavy footfalls outside, and Pate's wheezy voice. "Who the' hell's there?"

"Me," Bobbie's childish treble answered.

"What the'—Why, damn if it ain't the' Fitzgerald kid," Pate mumbled

in amazement, after a match had crackled noisily. Then, "Go back over an' tell the' boys to hold ever'thing fur a minute more, Bill. I gotta git the crazy young 'un away from here afore th' ball opens. When yuh see him leave, yuh kin start th' fireworks."

Sweat poured off Speed's forehead as he worked feverishly to get the key in the lock, handicapped by the fact that he had to force his forearm through the bars and turn the hand back to grope for a spot he couldn't see.

Subconsciously, he heard Pate scolding Bobbie and ordering him home. The pony's hooves plopped into the alley then along it. Grimly determined to be steady though his nerves were fairly shrieking for haste, Speed got another hand through the bars, got the end of the key between two fingers and steered it. Bootheels were grinding on gravel again outside when he almost yelled in delight.

The big key was home! Twisting it in the lock, he heard the bolt grate and the door gave with the light pressure of his shoulder. In a flash, he was outside and tiptoeing across the barren floor. A key was grating in the spring lock of the outside door as he caught his belt off the peg and buckled it on.

No time for a hold-up! When the door opened, Speed was behind it, a sixgun upraised. When the burly form of the sheriff came through, the gun descended in a swift, chopping blow with all the young puncher's strength behind it.

THE butt thudded home on Pate's skull, but he didn't go down. Instead, he plowed on with short, hesitant, dabbing steps, his knees buckled. Speed caught him by the collar, rammed him through the open doorway of the cell, slammed him on the bunk and left him, a huge groaning bulk, sprawled face down with his massive legs still on the floor.

Outside the cell, Speed locked the door, took the key with him, raced to the outer door, stopped to listen.

They were coming—coming without speech, and in good order, only the number of their stealthy footsteps piling up an audible sound.

Tough! They'd be certain to see him in the lighted doorway! A mental flash suggested that he extinguish the lamp, but another flash told him that that act would only give notice that something was wrong.

Taking no time for further consideration, he opened the door without haste, passed through, closed it, then slunk along the wall toward the alley.

"Who was that?" Some fellow in the van asked, cautiously.

"Reckon it was somebody Pate run outa here," Bill answered, as cautiously. "Seems like they musta been somebody messin' aroun' here 'sides that damn Fitzgerald cub.

"C'mon. Le's do our little dido. Damn if I ain't just achin' to slip a loop on that geezer's neck an'—"

RUNNING down the alley now, Speed heard Pate's asthmatic voice raised in an eerie howl inside the jail. As he sped away as fast as his feet would carry him, he looked over his shoulder and saw that the mob was pouring inside, yammering disjointed inquiries.

He reached the cross street, ran along the side of the hotel, turned the corner, hesitating but a few seconds there when he saw the old feedlot keeper leave his office to jog toward the jail, a lantern in one hand, a shotgun in the other.

As soon as the keeper's back was

turned, Speed crossed the front of the hotel and darted inside, fumbling his gear off its peg in the office and carrying it to Buck's stall.

Pandemonium raged in the little cowtown as he untied the halter and led the gruella out into the moonlight to make the saddling easier. The planks of the sidewalks were echoing to the pounding feet of scores of men. Someone in the street before the saloon fired a shotgun repeatedly, to rouse a town that already was awake and active. With the bridle on and the saddle seated but not cinched, Speed's spirits sank when he sensed that the pursuit had suddenly become more orderly. The cause of it became apparent when he heard the Sheriff's wheezy tones: "Hush that damn yappin' an' do as I say!

"Hellsfire, doncha know 'nuff to know that he'll make fur his hawse? Take a bunch an' cover that alley an' th' side streets, Bill!

"Rest of yuh come along with me."

With steady fingers Speed worked the latigos through the cinch rings, looped them snug. He was about to swing up when the rumble of running feet sounded out front, and the sheriff wheezed: "Some of yuh stay here an' cover that gate!

"Where does his rig hang, Pyott?"

"It's gone," the feedlot keeper answered. "It hung right by the'—"

"Damn where it hung! Which stall's his hawse in?"

"Right back this way. I'll show yuh."

The keeper's bobbing lantern started toward the rear of the wide lot, and in the circle of light Speed could see the massive legs of the sheriff, and the flabby hand holding his big sixgun.

Time for quick thinking—and, perhaps a prayer for luck. Speed led docile Buck ten yards down the line of stalls and into a shed where he knew Pyott kept his buggy. It was a narrow squeeze to get the horse past the buggy and behind it, but Lady Luck aided by causing him to try the only place where he could have been successful. Seconds after, he stood awaiting the outcome as calmly as possible. He had done what he could. The breaks of the stern game would decide.

THERE was a rush of feet, lanternlight dancing through the cracks of the shed, revealing man and horse plainly to anyone who should come that far down the line.

Then Pyott's quavering voice. "Th' slip'ry son-of-a-gun's gone!"

The knot of men surged back toward the front, Pate in the lead, wheezing orders right and left. Listening intently, Speed heard squads of riders leave in various directions and knew that the trails were being covered. He knew that a few still would be riding at random about the streets, but he had to take that chance. He led Buck out of the shed, swung up, walked the horse quietly toward the front. At the gate, he checked him a moment to look and listen.

All clear. He jogged into the street, swung around the corner, reached the alley — and brought the gruella almost nose to nose with a tall white horse, half obscured in the shadow of a shed.

Because of its neutral twilight color the gruella had not been seen while the white horse loomed stark in the half gloom.

Speed lifted Buck's head, touched him with the steel, sent him hurtling forward. Struck by twelve hundred pounds of horse and rider the grey went down like a doll on a rack, and it was the sheriff's raucous voice that came up from where the rider had

been sent asprawl in the gutter: "Here he is, fellers! Come a-runnin'!"

Horsemen showed ahead, made themselves heard to westward and up the alley to northward. Speed reined right, struck the railway, doubled westward along it with the horse on the cinders and between the rails. There might have been a bridge or culvert, but there wasn't.

The pack gathered behind him, fell into confusion when a horse went down, steadied again and pounded on, yelling wildly and spraying lead ahead of them.

A road showed dimly paralleling the railway on the right. Speed slid the gruella down into it in a shower of cinder ballast, reined him westward award from the pack, called for all he had.

For a mile, some of the leaders held their own, a couple of them even gaining a little. Then Buck's gruella blood asserted its superiority over the common range horse. Gradually the mass of riders receded in his wake. The shooting stilled. Speed slowed a little and patted Buck's lathering neck. "All right, old feller! You're the best friend I ever had, or even hope to—

"I don't know, either. Maybe I'd better count that angel child Bobbie into first place. He—

"Not him either, dammit! Back of him is a party that sent him to town to do what he could to cheer me up.

"Don't get sore, Buck. But, without offense to you or Bobbie, I have to say that she takes first prize as a helper.

"Maybe you think that ain't fair. I don't either, but it goes as it lays."

THE first pursuit shaken off, Speed spent a couple of hours dodging bands of riders who were covering the trails. Once he almost ran into a squad that was returning to town, and Buck had to show his stamina again before they could be shaken off. Again, a lone rider burst out of the creek bottom and bore down on him, turning tail and dashing back among the willows when Speed swerved to meet him, guns blazing.

It was well past midnight when the gruella climbed the big knoll on which Speed had camped the night before—he having selected that spot as the last place in which Pate would seek him. Unrolling his pallet in the cedar clump, with Buck picketed in a nearby glade, he lay down, comfortable and unworried. After gazing thoughtfully up at the star-studded night sky for a time, he arrived at a great decision:

"Pate and the Stones have made me out to be a dirty dry gulcher," he mused. "Alright, I'll be just that —or damn near it.

"It's a cinch I got a lot of shooting to do. From now on out, I ain't going to aim at any man's knuckles or the frame of his gun, either.

"That goes for the toad-bellied sheriff as well as anybody else. If I have to do the lone outlaw stunt, I'm going to make it a classic."

Chapter V

THE TRAP

THE east was paling and the morning mists were thinning on the crest of the knoll when Speed rode Buck down to the flat, skirting the washes and working northeast where instinct told him the Triple-F ranchstead would be. He had not gone far when he struck an east-west fence line that told its own story. The posts were stout and the six wires were new; but, as he rode along the line, Speed saw splice after splice where the strands had been cut. Finally he came to a gap that had not been repaired. It was freshly

cut, and he knew that the Fitzgerald force now was insufficient to make fence repairs—even if they knew the fence had been cut.

Riding Buck inside, Speed repaired the break, and angled toward a big white house he could see on a slight elevation, almost due north of him. Following a cattle path up the slope, he left it for a lane that skirted the orchard that lay between him and the house. After he had passed the trees and the view of the place was unobstructed, he reined in, rasping angry curses between his even teeth.

Not a whole pane remained in the lower windows of the front of the house, and the porch was littered with shattered glass and wood splinters.

When Speed rode up, the girl appeared on the porch, her oval face wan and drawn, her lids heavy from lack of sleep. She gave Speed a quick, bright smile, then spoke hurriedly in a low voice: "You shouldn't have come here. You must know that we can't protect you."

Speed swung down. "I reckon I'll have to try to protect myself." He nodded toward the shattered windows. "It looks like you need protection more than I do."

"It does look pretty bad, but I think those bullies were only trying to worry us. There were enough of them to have wiped us out, but they only fired a few volleys, then galloped off. We lost some windows and some sleep. Incidentally, Bobbie's asleep now, or he'd be here to make a fuss over his 'pard'."

"They tried to break your nerve, eh?"

"I think that was all. They didn't do it, though."

"Bully girl! How's the dad?"

She smiled again. "He's doing just fine. Doctor says he's practically out of the woods. All he needs is quiet and rest."

Speed looked at the mess on the porch again. "Yeh, quiet and rest. Fat chance he's got to get either.

"Putting all that to one side, though, I came up here to bum a little chuck off you people. If you'll haze me toward the mess house and introduce me to your cook—that is, if you and your dad understand that I didn't gulch him."

"We certainly do understand that. As to the food, I'll attend to that, myself. Greasy is tired and sleepy. He was up all night."

"And I suppose you weren't."

"Yes, but I'm perfectly fresh and—"

"Pardon me, but you don't look it. Lead me to your kitchen, though. Then go lie down. I'll make a little coffee and tip over a few eggs, if you have some handy."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I was about to get Dad's breakfast and my own. It will be no trouble to include you."

AFTER eating with the girl, Speed was taken to the living-room to meet Fitzgerald, who proved to be a rugged-faced, quick-speaking rancher of the frontier type. He and Edna May urged Speed to leave the ranch, arguing that Pate would be certain to come for him, and that resistance would be useless.

"Reckon you're right, at that, and I don't want to bring you any more trouble than you got already," he told them. "I'll lie out in the brush like a rabbit, coming in occasionally for supplies. But, I'm going to graze here till this thing comes to a head, and I'm going to do my best to help bring it to a head, too. Meanwhile, I'll ride your line at night. You'll have no trouble in the daytime."

As Speed finished speaking, a roan-

bearded old cowman with kindly eyes stumped in, his sun-cooked face fairly writhing with wrath. "Yuh know what," he exploded. "Whilst that gun-rukus was on las' night, them ornery polecats cut th' corral on th' side furdest from th' house an' run off all our saddle stuff, 'cept Edna May's bronc. I had it in th' box stall in th' barn or it 'ud a been took, too. Th' Kid's cayuse is on clover in th' orchard, as per usual, so it's awright. Them two's all th' saddlers we got left."

Fitzgerald's bushy brows drew down, and his old eyes flashed fire. But the girl spoke soothingly. "There, there now. Don't fret. After all, what's the difference if we're short of horses? We're shorter of riders."

"Reckon yuh're right, Hon," he said wearily. "Crumpled up like I am, I won't need a hawse fur a coon's age —if ever. Slim an' Greasy is awmost as run-down as I am, an' that new hand—"

"New hand?" Speed questioned quickly.

"I forgot to tell you," the girl explained. "He came out here yesterday with Pate's deputy, Bill Reynolds. Bill recommended him, and he insisted on staying, despite the risk, so—"

"Mind if I take a squint at this amiable volunteer before I leave?"

"Why of course not. Bring him in."

"Nope," Speed vetoed. "I don't want him to know I'm curious. I do want to look him over, though. I'll just loaf around and get in his way.

"And, while I think of it, tell him and everybody else that asks, that I'm leaving the country. If it hurts you to lie, let it hurt. I have some things to do, and I don't want a bunch on my trail all the time, if I can help it."

"Meanin' that yuh're damn fool enough to stick on this range when yuh know that yuh'll get yur neck stretched if yuh git ketched?" Fitzgerald asked.

"Meaning that I'm damn fool enough to stick on this range, though I know that I'll get my neck stretched if I get caught." Speed eyed the girl steadily as he made the statement.

"Oh—oh," Slim chuckled toothlessly, squinting at the girl's flushed face knowingly. "Oh—oh! Yuh just's well hush up, Boss! This buckeroo's gonna stick here till th' hide comes off.

"He-he-he! Haw! Haw! Haw! I gotta go tell Greasy th' ol' Triple-F has got to be a matrymonial agency."

"Watch that new hand close," Speed advised, as he started to leave.

"Maybe I better just fire him," Fitzgerald suggested, frowning uneasily.

"Nope, don't fire him. Keep him, but watch him. Notice if anybody comes to see him. I'll try to notice whom he goes to see, if anyone. If my suspicions are correct, he'll be carrying reports to the fellow who planted him here."

Fitzgerald's face was a thundercloud. "Meanin' Whetstone?"

"Maybe."

Lounging out to the corrals with Slim, Speed found the new hand relacing a stirrup leather in the saddle shed. He recognized him at once as the loafer he had seen in the saloon at Smoky Hill. Introduced as Jake Matthews, the fellow gave no sign that he ever had seen Speed before, and Speed let it go at that. When he left the ranch, after packing his saddle pockets with bacon, flour and coffee, he was certain in his own mind that a spy had been planted at the Triple-F. And he was equally cer-

tain that he knew who had done the planting.

"I'll drop in and see you once in a while," Speed told the girl at parting, "but I don't want even you to know when I'm coming. I'm almost afraid to know it myself for fear I'll get rattled and tell it to the rabbits I'm going to live among out there."

She waved a white hand to him from the vine-canopied porch when he looked back, after entering the lane. Brazenly, he tossed a kiss back to her. He could not be certain, but he thought she imitated the gesture, guardedly.

After riding down the sunlit slope to the washes, Speed dipped into a deep gully and dismounted, after being sure that he was out of sight of the house. Climbing the side of the wash, he lay with his eyes level with the plain and watched the ranchstead closely. Within ten minutes, he saw Matthews angling for town as fast as the girl's keen little filly could hoof it.

Speed remounted, grinning derisively. "Let him shag along and tell that bunch of pirates I'm here," he chuckled. "If they're lucky, they may be able to see a little of Buck's dust. That'll be all."

AFTER three days, Speed visited the Triple-F again, finding everything quiet. The rancher was restless, slightly feverish. The girl was nervous and depressed. As he was leaving, her hand clung to his when she told him good-bye, and her voice trembled as she said, "You've been wonderful, but I really think it is time you left the country."

"Yeh. Just ride away and leave you folks in a tight, eh?"

She hesitated, and when she spoke her voice was so low and hesitant that he could barely catch her words. "It will not be necessary for you to stay around here longer on our account. I don't think there'll be any more trouble."

"Meaning just what?"

She locked and unlocked her fingers nervously. "Well, I—I—that is, I think we shall be able to make peace with the Stones."

"How?"

She was still hesitant. "Well, you see if I—"

She stopped, flushing and paling alternately and refusing to meet his gaze.

"If you marry that young whelp, everything will be jake, eh?" he supplied, brutally.

She nodded, her eyes still downcast. "It's the only way, and I can't let Father be ruined. Losing the horses finishes us."

His voice was bitter. "Quitter, eh?"

"Call it that, " she said, wearily, then turned and went inside.

His thoughts black, Speed had started Buck when Matthews shambled around the corner of the house and spoke to him. "Where'll yuh be tomorrow, Bane? I found somethin' down 'mongst them washes that I wanta show yuh. Think it kinda gives us a line on who gulched th' boss."

"So? What is it?"

Matthews grinned mysteriously. "Ruther yuh'd look at it fur yurself."

"Well, let's go look at it now."

"Can't go now. Got some work to do. Thought if yuh could meet me tomorrow, I'd—"

"All right," Speed broke in. "Be at the creek ford at noon. That suit?"

"Fine and dandy," Matthews grinned, then turned and ambled toward the corral.

Speed wheeled Buck and rode back to the house. When the girl came to the porch he didn't mince words. "Don't peddle yourself to save your

Dad, for at least twenty-four more hours. Give me that long to try to save both of you."

He wan face brightened momentarily, then clouded again. "It's of no use. You can do nothing with the Stones."

"Maybe I can. Anyway, I'm going to try. You wait another day, and we'll see. Do it?"

"Yes, but I—"

He rode close to the porch and reached out a hand to catch her chin and tilt it upward a little. "Head up, Girl! We ain't licked yet."

She looked up at him, the deep eyes brimming. "We?"

"Yes, 'we'! I'm licked when you turn yellow—not before."

"You don't understand. I can take it, but it's killing Dad."

"It would kill him sooner if you married that dirty snake.

"Anyway, stick it out for one more day."

"Well, all right if—"

"Fine! I'll see if I can't handle this for you."

When Speed rode away he knew that Matthews already was on his way to the Stone place to report that Speed had taken the bait and would be on hand to be killed, tomorrow.

It meant a trap, an ambush, a single-handed fight against overwhelming odds.

In the mood he was in, that was exactly what Speed wanted.

The tall puncher did no scouting that night. Instead, he bathed in the little pool by the knoll and went to his blankets early. He had laid out that big job for the next day, and he had to be fit and ready.

Chapter VI

LOCKED HORNS

IT WAS high noon when Speed Bane rode down to the creek ford, taking no precautions, as he did not expect an attack at that much-frequented spot. Within a few minutes, Matthews appeared, coming from the north by a trail that followed the east bank. He grinned his sly, shifty grin and started to make idle conversation, but Speed was briskly business-like. "Get busy, and let's go see what we see when we see it."

Matthews reined his little brown bronc around, but did not start him. Instead, he pointed back up the meandering trail by which he had come. "Go 'head, I'll foller."

Speed started, twisted about in saddle with one hand on the cantle—and, incidentally, within inches of his right-hand gun. He rode so while Buck wound along the trail for more than a mile. Always Speed kept his gaze fixed on Matthews' rat-like eyes, watching for the fleck of an eyelid or the contortion of a facial muscle that would be the signal that danger was imminent.

They reached another shallow. "Cross here," Matthews said, eyeing the swift running water, instead of looking at Speed.

Speed rode down into the limpid stream and waited till Matthews stopped alongside. "Go 'head," the latter prompted fidgeting in saddle, after they had idled there for a half-minute.

"After you, feller," Speed told him. "I'm commencing to feel that it's impolite for me to lead the way all the time."

Matthews threw his chest out a little, affecting offended virtue. "Yuh meanin' to hint that they's sumpin' wrong here?"

Speed's quiet smile was disarming. "Nope. I wouldn't hint anything like that for the world. You ride ahead. That hawse has a pretty rump, and I like to look at it."

Matthews fairly squirmed now, as if his saddle were a red-hot griddle. "Don't look good, eh?" Speed taunted him. "Afraid if you rode up that bank ahead, the gang might make a mistake and plug you, eh? And you couldn't plug me in the back either, eh?

"Well, take it easy, feller. You're not going up there ahead of me. Also, you're not going up there behind me. You're not going up there at all, for a while."

"Th' hell I ain't."

"Exactly. The hell you ain't."

As the puncher spoke, he touched Buck with the rowel and reined left, jamming the horse against Matthews' gun-hand. A second later, the two were rolling in the gravely shallows, grunting and lashing out wickedly at each other.

It was a short, sharp struggle. Three times in swift succession, Speed's fist thudded home on Matthews' stubbly jaw. It was enough. Speed jerked him to his feet, propelled him back to the horses, lashed his hands and hobbled his feet with strings from Matthews' saddle. Then be bound him fast to a tree at the water's edge with his riata and gagged him with his own neckcloth.

So much successfully accomplished. Knowing that the danger spot was near, Speed let Buck out of the water, ground hitched him, tied Matthews' bronc to a scrub cedar. Then he proceeded cautiously up through the willow fringe afoot, saddlegun in hand.

One look at the plain was convincing. There was a plot of despondent, drouth-seared blue-joint comprising approximately twenty acres. The only cover on it that would hide a jackrabbit was in the form of two crumbling sandstone boulders standing close together in the hot sunshine, perhaps a furlong from the creek.

Had Speed had any doubt as to where the ambuscade was laid, it would soon have been dispelled. For, after he had lain inactive for a matter of ten minutes, there was a movement in the shaded spot between the boulders. A big white hat appeared, then a shadowy face and the outline of a man's arms and a rifle.

"Getting restless, eh?" Speed diagnosed. "Well, we'll let you fret for a while longer. It won't steady your nerves any, and it may split up your bunch, after a while.

"First, though, we're going to take rounsin's on you."

He went back to the branch, cut into saddle, rode along the creekbed, following its curve till he was sure he was well north and west of the boulders. Here, he dismounted and lay among the willows, watching. He could see their horses now. Jim Stone's big paint was easily identified, as was Whetstone's washed-out looking sorrel. There were two other mounts that he failed to recognize, but he thought he knew to whom they belonged.

His own pulse racing madly, Speed could imagine the tension among the watchers when their prey and Matthews failed to appear.

Damn 'em, let' em squirm and fret! He'd wait 'em out! The effect became apparent after another ten minutes when Jim Stone came out from between the two rocks, mounted his paint and spurred toward the creekbed—sent to investigate the delay.

THAT meant action. Jim would discover Matthews at once, and they would be on their guard. They wanted to surprise him; he'd sur-

prise them, and do it while Jim was running his errand, and the odds were shorter.

Though determined to strike, Speed made no hasty move. He got his saddlegun from its sheath in the skirts, saw that it and the sixes were fully loaded and in order. He took his vest off, rolled up his sleeves, hung his quirt on the horn. Then he mounted and set Buck into a canter, holding straight for the rocks. After he had gone fifty yards, he saw a flat slab by a little depression a dozen rods from the boulders. He swerved Buck toward it and loped on, knowing it would be only a matter of seconds now until the rocks would erupt hurtling lead.

For, bearing back from the direction of the creek, Jim Stone was standing up in stirrups, gesturing and yelling frantically.

No use trying longer to make a sneak of it. Speed gave Buck his head, and the gruella flattened out like a coursing hare, swishing through the crackling grass with effortless speed.

The friendly looking slab was close at hand now, but a wheezing, asthmatic voice that Speed knew roared out an order from between the rocks: "Here th' ornery dew-drinker comes! Crack down on him, boys! Give him pure-dee red-hot hell an' repeat!"

Speed zigzagged the agile gruella on for another ten yards, while grey-black smoke spewed from the rocky opening and singing lead slapped at him right and left.

Then the puncher reined sharply left, leaving saddle as the gruella reared and pivoted like a dancing girl in answer to a rein signal.

Landing on hip and elbow, he swung the saddlegun up, steadied it, pressed trigger with the sights lined on a big paint horse that was coming up from the creek with whirlwind speed. "First blood," he grunted, as the horse flinched, hesitated, veered erratically, went down. He sent another slug whining toward the slim, shrinking figure lying prone behind the horse, then turned his attention to the three in the ambuscade. Always in the front of his mind was the thought, "I must get Whetsone! If I get Whetstone, the others may let up on the Fitzgeralds! Whatever else happens, I must get Whetstone!"

Lead was fairly spouting from the big slit now, and he answered it steadily while the lush grass beside him whispered protest as slugs tore through it and the little plain seemed to fairly rock with the crashing explosions as red tongues of flame licked out through the thickening smoke curtain that was building up between him and the three.

Then, as he fought on, centering his lead on the thick shadows over there, he smiled contentedly when he became convinced that, by shifting location, he had done more than surprise them and disarrange their trap.

FIGHTING coolly, calculatingly, Speed had figured every chance, sought every advantage, noted every sound and movement. At the outset, it had been his thought that his own downfall would be only a matter of time. They could lie in there, snug and safe, and take their time in getting him—or slaughter him when he got desperate and rushed.

Now, his alert ears telegraphed to his even more alert mind that a peculiarity of that rocky fortification was telling in his favor—at least to the extent that it would force a fight in the open, or no fight at all.

For, his ears told him that every slug he sent searching between the rocks ricocheted before buzzing out through the opening on the far side. That meant that the space the three occupied was a funnel, with the big end pointed his way.

It was a model retreat when facing an attack from the east; it was positively untenable, when lead was singing in there from the west. They'd have to come out, or they'd have to leave by the other slit and—

The saddlegun hot and empty in his hands, Speed dropped it and cuffed out his sixes when the smoke cloud billowed sluggishly aside, split by the charge of three running figures.

In the van was the taut, crouched figure of Whetstone, his furrowed face pinched with fighting fury, his every movement lithe, stealthy, pythonlike in its devilish effectiveness. Back of him and a little aside lumbered Pate, and beside him, Bill.

His own fighting instinct surging high now, Speed came to his feet, snapped a slug at Whetstone's elusive form, and another past him at Pate.

The action that followed on that smoked-veiled plain could not have been accurately recorded. Dimly Speed realized that Whetstone's six had flamed red, almost with his own. The officers were but a split wink slower. Something tore at his right biceps, bringing a hideous groan from him despite the fact that his teeth were set. His left leg weakened, shocked past painfulness. Spun half around by the impact of the heavy slug, he completed the circle as the simplest way to regain his balance, and whanged away with both sixes, though every time his right-hand gun kicked the pain almost made him swoon.

The whole scene was growing a bit fantastic now, or his senses were reeling, he couldn't tell which. As if in a horrible nightmare, he saw the three do unexpected and grotesque things.

Whetstone was yelling curses in a high, shrieking voice that rolled past the creek to join the eerie gun echoes that were blaring along the soundboarding hillside beyond. He had dropped one gun and was holding the free hand pressed tightly against his side, while with the other hand he fired a six wildly and purposelessly.

Bill had stopped shooting and was clutching feebly at the arm of Pate, who was tredling his massive legs, going through the motions of walking toward Speed, without advancing an inch.

Then Bill slumped, dropped his gun, clutched the squabby sheriff frantically with both hands. They went down together, writhed into a shapeless heap, lay still.

Speed rallied his failing faculties and pinned his roving gaze on Whetstone, whose eerie voice had stilled suddenly, though he still was on his feet, six in hand.

Speed raised a gun that had grown very, very heavy, leveled it, swung the sights in line with that heaving chest. Then he lowered it again and sat down on the friendly slab. Whetstone had collapsed, firing the six straight up as he fell sidewise as a tree falls.

The plain stilled; the smoke spiraled slowly away in the gentle prairie breeze. Speed knotted his neck-cloth around a gushing wound in his leg, tucked his crippled arm inside his suspender.

The fight was over. Whetstone was done for and—

But, something else remained to

be done—something immediately urgent and pressing!

Oh, yes! Jim was around there somewhere yet! Have to get him!

SPEED set his teeth, gained his feet, stooped again to catch up the flask he saw projecting either from Pate's pocket or Bill's, he couldn't tell which. He unstoppered it, took a deep swig, then another, dropped it, left it gurgling on the sod and hobbled through the gap between the boulders, drawing his left-hand gun as he started for the fallen horse. He hadn't taken three faltering steps until Jim rose to his feet, his belt off, empty hands raised high, his thin face ash-grey. "I'm s'rrenderin'," he whined. "Fur Gawd's sake don't shoot me, Man!"

"I won't," Speed assured him rallying all his energy to the task of walking and talking steadily. "I wouldn't shoot you for anything. It 'll be too much fun quirting your damn rotten cowardly hide off, while you're alive!

"Start toward my hawse, now and step lively."

Jim started, stumbling and cringing and begging. "Yuh don't really mean t' whup me, do yuh?"

"I will unless—"

"Unless what, fur Gawd's sake?"

As they reached the horses, Speed caught his quirt off the saddle-horn, ran it lovingly through his fingers, popped it suggestively as he answered. "Unless you talk quick and talk straight.

"I'm going to ask you a line of questions. Any time you hesitate for more than ten seconds in answering, I start quirting. There'll be no stopping after I start till I cut your back clear through to your yellow belly!"

Ten minutes later, ashen-faced Jim was sitting beside his dead father, crying like a lost boy. On the slab again, a little dizzy but feeling some steadier, Speed was wondering what his next move would be.

He had shot two officers of the law. He had done that in a justified defense of his own life, and with the law on his side. With his case fairly presented—

Hell! He knew he had forgotten something! Where was Matthews? Of course Jim had found and released him. He turned to his dejected captive. "What become of that ape-faced man-bait Matthews?"

"Gone to th' ranch to git help," Jim answered tonelessly.

"Sent him for more help, eh?" Speed taunted. "Didn't think five to one would be enough, eh?

"Well, if he comes back with help before I get out of here, I've this consolation: They'll get here too late to save three damned skunks—maybe four."

A shudder ran the length of Jim's slender body. "Yuh wouldn't shoot me in cold blood, would yuh?"

"Might. Guess I would if it was that or turn you loose."

Speed rose, braced himself for another effort, sat down again, thankful that Jim was too shaken to realize his condition.

They sat so for a long time while pain left Speed's leg and arm and his mind commenced to get peaceful and serene in the quiet of a semi-coma. He wondered how long it would be before Jim saw his condition and got up and killed him. Or would the Boxed-S cut-throats arrive first and do the job?

Then, as if from a great distance, Jim's voice came, shaky with a great fear. "Th' bunch is comin'! Yuh won't kill me, will yuh?"

"Maybe not. Roll over on your belly

and lie still. Don't even look up until I say so!"

HURRYING hooves anviled on a rock outcrop somewhere, pounded hard prairie sod, subsided to a subdued swishing as they took to the lush. The little plain became suddenly alive with drumming hooves and excited voices. There was an argument of some sort, ending in a snapped order.

Some of the sounds receded; others grew stronger. Speed rose wearily, thankful again that Jim Stone wasn't looking—didn't know that he could rise at any time and cuff his captor over as one swats a fly.

Hoofbeats close to the big rocks now! Speed rubbed a hand across his glazing eyes as though to remove a bandage there, tugged with his facial muscles till he pried his drooped lids apart.

Horses rounding the rocks within yards of him! In the dancing heat imps he saw a dozen or more riders swarming toward him in a compact body. With a hand that was heavy and numb, he worked a six free of the leather, tilted the muzzle with an effort, dropped it again to squint stupidly at the leading rider.

It was Bobbie, reining the little white pony expertly to avoid running down the inert bodies of the three. Ahead of him floated his clear, excited treble, "Hi there, Pardner! How yuh makin' it?"

Then another voice, slow, drawling, somehow whimsically humorous—the voice of Speed's only friend at Smoky Hill, Ed Seale. "Hold 'er as is, feller, till I check up on this one man war!

"Leapin' lizards, cowboy, ain't yuh got yur bellyfull of fightin' yit?"

Speed flogged every ounce of his failing energy to the fore, spurred his lagging muscles enough to raise his quirt and fleck Jim Stone promptingly across his thighs. "Here's Seale—all the law that's left in this country, now! Roll over, damn you, and tell him everything that you told me awhile ago!

"First, who shot Fitzgerald?"

"I did. Yuh see I wanted Edna May, an' he wouldn't leave me have 'er, so I—"

"Never mind the alibi. Now, what did Pate have to do with all this devilment?

"Go ahead and tell it or I'll—I'll—I—"

The big brown boulders seemed to roll crazily toward him. The plain undulated beneath his feet, tipping him off balance. He was vaguely conscious that he was falling, then that someone had caught him and was easing him down.

Then, he felt nothing, knew nothing—just nothing at all.

Chapter VII
CHECKING UP

AS IF he were coming back to Earth after having been on some other planet for an indefinite period, Speed Bane roused slowly to find that he smelled strongly of antiseptic and that his arm and leg had been bandaged and plastered tightly, but were painless.

He looked about him, wonderingly, to find that he lay on the horsehair sofa in the Triple-F ranch-house, and that oblong patches of morning sunlight lay bright on the rugs.

Several other persons were in the room. Fitzgerald was propped up on pillows, smoking a black-rimmed cob pipe, his weathered face wreathed in smiles. Doc Savage was packing his kit in preparation for leaving. Straddliing a chair as if it were a horse, red-headed Ed Seale was listening to garrulous old Slim Chance, who was broadcasting for Fitzgerald's benefit:

"Yuh see," Slim gabbled on, "Bobbie happent to ooze along down there an' see Speed fightin' hell outa them polecats. He sloped fur town hell-fur-leather an' fetched Seale an' a bunch. Matthews an' two-three others tried to head him, but th' kid out-rid 'em plenty an' got through.

"When Seale an' th' bunch arriv, they found Speed bled plumb white and' all in, an' that slim-complected Jim Stone layin' there blubberin', not knowin' that Speed was—"

Fitzgerald waved his pipe for silence. "Yuh've told all that there three times, awready. What I can't git is what part Pete an' Bill was playin'." He paused, eyeing Seale with a worried look. "'Course, after all, Pate was sheriff, an' Bill was—"

"Both of 'em was damn snakes," Seale cut in, positively. "They'd been in on all this rustlin', takin' all yur hustled stock down to Pate's ranch fifty mile b'low here. Some of it was shipped from there, but most of it is there yit, an' b'longs to you. I got suspicious of 'em a long time ago, an' I been checkin' things on th' quiet till I had all th' answers, even afore Jim caved in an' puked up his guts.

"Whetstone an' Jim didn't give a damn fur them cows. They was out to twist yur tail plumb off. With Pate helpin' 'em, it was easy. Th' only time they fell down was when they got ready to hang this Speed feller to git him outa th' way. Havin' personal objections to that 'rangement, he broke fence on 'em an' th' party was off."

Fitzgerald had another question. "Then yuh don't think Speed'll git snubbed up before no judge nor—"

"Hell, no. Fact is, th' board met las' night an' 'pointed me sheriff to fill th' vacancy caused by this here double-geared cowpoke's lead. I'm th' law, an' what I say goes. What I'm sayin' is that yuh're all hunky-dory, with plenty of cows an' good credit at th' bank, now that yuh gotta chanct fur yur white alley.

"This fightin' wampus of a puncher is awright, too. If he wants to be my head depitty—"

"Not any," Fitzgerald vetoed, emphatically. "I gotta have a bunch, an' th' bunch hasta have a boss. He's gonna be my foreman or I'm gonna start 'nuther war."

"You're on," Speed surprised them by saying. "Being your foreman suits me right down to a 't'. I'll rod your bunch, and—"

"Hey," Doc interposed, stepping to the sofa to lean over and shake an iodine-stained finger impressively at his patient. "Don't get to riding yet, Cowboy! Also, cut out this palaver and just lie quiet after I chase these gabsters out of here. You're tougher than reinforced rawhide or you wouldn't be alive, now. That doesn't mean that you don't have to rest and build you a fresh supply of blood."

AFTER the others had gone, Speed became aware for the first time that Edna May was sitting in a tidied rocker near the head of the sofa. When she looked at him, there was something in the deep violet eyes that caused his depleted bloodstream to pulse vigorously and his heart to shuttle around in his chest in a most astounding way.

She rose, giving him a dizzying smile as she passed the sofa and went to the bed to pat Fitzgerald's pillows into place and take his pipe away from him despite his whimsical objections. "The doctor says you'll be all right, now that your worries are over," she told him. "But you must forget all this excitement and take a good nap. You haven't slept a dozen minutes since we got news of the fight."

Fitzgerald looked at the girl, then at Speed. Then he grinned wisely and turned his face toward the bag window.

Five minutes later, a shrill, boyish voice floated in through that same window where a freckled, snub-nosed face showed above the sill: "Hold 'er, Pardner! Hang holt till I can get in there an' help yuh!

"Keep 'er neck-clamped till I can ketch holt of 'er foot an' help stretch 'er out!

"Us white men hasta stick together, an'—"

Fitzgerald rose to one elbow to scowl fiercely out at his small son. "Leave! Begone! Vamose! Puck-ah-chee! Git to hell outa here!"

After Bobbie had pattered across the porch and away, quiet descended on the cool, chintz-curtained room. It was a peaceful, blissful quiet that was broken only by an occasional snore from Fitzgerald's cot—a snore that had a contented chuckle in it.

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NOVELS

NOW ON SALE

Waite flung a parting shot at the saloon as Talbot .reached down and grabbed him.

GUNSMOKE RECKONING

by GUY ARNOLD

A pair of straight-shooting gunnies match bullets in a range feud to the death

FUNNY the way things work out. Take Lyle Waite and Wayne Talbot, for instance. Both of them square shooters, honest-to-God Buckaroos, the kind of men you'd be proud to ride the river with. They thought heaps of each other too, but they'd never let one another know that.

Funny the way things work out. You see, both Waite and Talbot were gunmen. The kind of men who hired their guns and fought for a living. Punching cattle was for less talented souls. Now, don't misunderstand. All gunmen are not bad, no more than all Mexicans are bad. It just depends on to whom they hire their guns and why. And whether they think they are doing right.

Now Waite and Talbot should have been friends. In any ordinary circumstances they would have been friends. But both were gunmen. Damned fine gunmen. In fact, there were very few men in the west who might match their speed. Wes Hardin came before their time, or else they would have swapped lead with him. You see how it is, each gunslinger represents a definite threat to the other, and until one has been eliminated, there is no telling who is the better man. They needed no argument. Just living in the same section of the country was enough. Waite and Talbot thought heaps of each other, but that made no difference.

On this particular day things were coming to head. Talbot stood in the doorway if the little line cabin and watched the other dismount. A slight smile twisted his mouth. The showdown might as well be now. But Waite's hands were away from his guns, swinging idly at his sides as he bowlegged forward.

The one leaning in the doorway suddenly straightened, the smile replaced by a chilling alertness, and when he spoke his voice was the crack of a whip. "I reckon you've come far enough, Waite, just about th' proper distance for shootin'."

Waite stopped abruptly. "'Sall right, Wayne. But I ain't come tuh shoot it out with yuh this time—just tuh parley."

The two stood for a moment in silence staring at each other, former scenes coursing their memories. This was not the first time they had faced each other. One other time, their hands had been hovering over their guns, the length of a bar separating them, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Probably neither remembered just what had started their difference, but both had a vivid recollection of the cause of the interruption. The entrance of a sheriff and his posse—and each had been a man with a price upon his head.

After that, escape had been their foremost thought. They had fled out of a side door together. Lyle Waite's men were pouring out of the front door. For that matter both horses were out in front, but Wayne Talbot's horse had been trained to come at his whistle.

It was as though hostilities had been declared off between these two at the meeting of a common enemy. Waite had started running down the side street, scarcely pausing as he blazed away at the side door they had passed through. But Talbot had stopped to wait for his horse, knowing it was the only way escape was possible, and as the horse dashed around the corner he took the saddle on a dead run. As his mount swung opposite the other fleeing man, he reached down and swung Waite up behind.

OUT into the badlands they had fled—and escaped. Here they had parted with a promise to meet again some day. They could not settle their issue now. The heat of the moment had gone. And what one had done for the other was still too fresh in their minds.

If Waite felt any gratitude toward the other he failed to express it. Talbot did not expect it. He had done for Waite what Waite would have done for him under similar circumstances.

That had been four years before. Today, as they faced each other, that inherent enmity was in their attitude. Talbot, tall, lithe as a tiger and

as alert, stood spread legged, his hands hovering above the butts of his twin Colts.

Waite's big body was erect, but ready at a split instant to bend into a deadly gunman's crouch, an act that would end with two Colts spewing lead. But just now he stood erect.

These two were better acquainted with gunplay than words. Right now both were at a loss how to express themselves. But since Waite had made the first play it was up to him to show his hand first. Talbot stood at ease waiting for whatever move Waite might see fit to make.

"This line shack b'longs tuh th' J J," Waite broke the ice.

"Used tuh be," corrected Talbot softly.

Waite overlooked the inflection of the words. "I'm ridin' for th' K. C."

"Gunnin' yuh mean." Talbot's tone was purring.

"Have it yuhr own way," Waite's tone had grown harder "If keepin' undesirable characters off J J range is gunnin', then I'm sure enough gunnin', Wayne."

Again the two fell silent. Waite had cast his last challenge.

"Was yuh meanin' me in that last remark?" Talbot's tone was almost nonchalant in quality but his alert attitude had in no way relaxed.

Waite dodged a direct answer. "Yuh're a-plenty welcome, Wayne, tuh J J grub an' th' hospitality of this line cabin—providin' yuh're driftin' through. If yuh want a job I reckon I c'n land yuh one with th' J J. They pay big money to th'right kind of riders—"

"Now, Lyle," interrupted Talbot in a gently chiding tone, "ain't yuh old enough tuh know no outfit in th' country is big enough for th' two of us?"

"Don't get me wrong, Wayne," he said coldly. "Th' boss sent me over here tuh reason with yuh—an' tuh get yuh on our side if I could. I ain't askin' yuh tuh join us because I got any love for yuh—it's orders."

Talbot eyed him hard. There was a confusion in Waite's manner that made him suspicious. Then he laughed incredulously. There was no such thing as sentiment in this quick-drawing gunnie's make up, nor in his own. They might respect each other, they might fight back to back against a common enemy, but any friendlier relations—never!

Talbot's voice was as dry as tinder as he remarked "Ride back an' tell that J J range hog yuh failed in carryin' out his orders. Tell him Wayne Talbot has squatted in his J J line cabin, on J J range, an expects tuh make it his future residence. And you kin tell him my gun is goin' tuh protect every homesteader that sees fit tuh squat on J J range."

"So yuh've hired yuhr gun out tuh squatters, have yuh?" said Wayne with stinging emphasis.

"Not hired, Lyne—donated."

"Yuh're buckin' a strong combination, Wayne, besides renegin' on yuhr kind."

"Not too strong, Lyle. As for renegin' on my kind—I ain't. The' J J ain't my kind. Johnson's a range hog —an' I hate hogs."

Yuh'll die with yuhr boots on. Johnson ain't th' kind tuh show mercy."

"I'd die like I always meant to—an' it's for a fair cause, just an' reasonable. As for mercy—we ain't askin' it. All we want is fair fight."

"I don't get yuhr stand," Waite said, puzzled. "It ain't like yuh tuh go back on a cowman."

"I ain't. These folks I'm representin' will someday be cattlemen.

There's enough range here tuh run three or four times as many cattle as Johnson has got. Yet he'd hog all th' range. I'd rather see a dozen ranches in this country with herds of four or five thousand than one with fifty or a hundred thousand."

"I don't know about that fair fightin'," muttered Waite, directing a black frown at the ground. "Johnson's a hard old cuss—an' he's got some gun-toters I reckon wouldn't hesitate none dry-gulchin' a man."

THE attitude of both men had relaxed. Again opportunity had come and passed without either taking advantage of it. Lyle raised his head, a peculiar gleam in his eyes. "I can't vouch for the rest but I can for myself. Everything will be fair fight between us, Wayne."

"Everything fair fight between us, Lyle," repeated Talbot. Strange that it would be so, but the two foes' hands met in a hard grip.

"Tell Johnson just what I said," shouted Talbot after the retreating form. Waite waved a reassuring hand, swung to his horse, and had soon disappeared back over the rise.

Talbot's eyes rested long upon the rise after the horse and his rider had disappeared, a thoughtful expression about his features. "Lyle, a square shooter," he murmured to the rangeland that stretched out before him.

Waite rode along at a jogging pace, a hulking, dejected looking figure, slumped deep in his saddle. Upon his face was a morose frown, puzzled and mournful. "That Wayne—he's one white hombre," he muttered.

"He's makin' a mistake then," snarled Sam Young, his face purple with violent feeling. "By God, if they harm one o' mine I'll get 'im if it's th' last thing on earth I do!"

"That's all right. But is that goin' tuh bring yuhr kid back tuh you, Young?" Talbot regarded him sternly. "Think of yuhr family, men! If yuh won't go yuhrselves at least get shed of them!"

"Talbot's talkin' sense, boys," agree Tom Evans. "I reckon I'll take his advice an' get my folks outa heah. You-all c'n do as yuh damn please."

"Sure, that part's all right," assented Young. "We gotta get our families outa this. But me, I'm standin' pat an' fightin' for my rights. An' any time I see a Johnson rider I'm goin' tuh shoot on sight. If that's th' way they want tuh fight I'll sure accommodate 'em."

"Then get busy, men, an' warn every family man in th' country what we're aimin' tuh do. If they won't get out themselves tell 'em they gotta get their family out," ordered Talbot briskly. "Just a minute," he called, as some of them started to turn away. He considered his words carefully before speaking again.

"Boys," he commenced, and he purposely made his tone impressive, "we're in for a taste of hell. An' in our situation it's goin' tuh be pretty much every man for himself. But this much I want understood. There's one of these gun-fighters of Johnson's that's my particular meat. His name is Lyle Waite. He won't plug nobody in th' back. He's square. But he's too fast with a gun for any of you gents tuh face. So lay off of him an' I'll guarantee he'll lay off of you."

"How yuh fight these others is up tuh you. Yuh c'n fight anyway yuhr natures dictate—I don't admire a dry-gulcher—I got about as much

respect for that type of man as I have for a rat. But if yuh fight 'em that way yuh're only usin' their own methods.

"As for Tuffy—tell Walters I'll look up that varmint personally."

He swung his horse about, and a rapid clatter of hoofs marked his departure. The group watched him out of sight, then looked significantly at each other. Talbot was not heading back toward the line cabin where he was making his headquarters, but toward the distant J J Ranch.

"Somebody's goin' tuh pay—an pay dear!" exclaimed Evans. "Boys, that Talbot has blood in his eyes."

To beard the lion in his den, to ride right into the midst of that pack of blood-hungry wolves—that took cold, chilled-steel nerve. And that is just what Talbot did. He approached the ranch house just as the sun was sinking down from sight, alert and watchful, his eyes glowing like coals of fire, his heart rankling with hate. He had hoped to overtake Wayne but failing in this he determined to face Johnson himself with the cowardly deed.

As he approached within a hundred yards of the house a couple of forms appeared in the doorway of the bunkhouse. Talbot halted his horse abruptly, his right hand falling to his gun, eyeing the two intently. For a time all remained stationary. Then holding his reins between his teeth, his right hand still upon the butt of his gun, he raised his left hand, palm outward, and advanced slowly.

THE two remained motionless. Talbot advanced within twenty-five yards and again halted. Then he spoke for the first time.

"Is Lyle Waite here?"

The two gave a start and glanced questioningly at each other. "What'cha want of him?" one asked evasively.

Talbot had made his query purposely loud. Since he heard no movement within, he decided Lyle was away. He knew if Lyle was inside and heard his voice that he would put in an appearance. So instead of answering the question he put another.

"Is Johnson here?"

"He's up at the house," answered the second rider.

Talbot considered for a moment, but never for a second relaxing his vigilance. He realized he must proceed with caution until he learned the number of enemies he had to contend with.

"I'm Wayne Talbot," he introduced himself. Again the two gave a start and flashed a quick look at each other. Talbot saw and smiled grimly. "Lyle paid me a call this mornin'—offered me a proposition—thought I'd like tuh talk it over with Johnson."

"Yuh better shag along up tuh th' house an' see 'im," one of the bunkmen said. "Reckon th' boss'll be glad tuh talk tuh yuh."

"Call 'im down here," suggested Talbot, and added with a forced grin of friendliness, "Yuh see when I talk business with a man I like tuh do my talkin' on my own ground."

The two consulted for some time in doubt but finally decided it would be safer to call their boss down there to interview Talbot where there would be three against one than to have the two alone in the house. One of the men started immediately for the house.

AS SOON as he had disappeared Talbot swung swiftly from his horse. The other now, now squatting

in the doorway of the bunkhouse, jerked to his feet with a startled exclamation. There was something of menace in Talbot's quick change of attitude. He took a long stride in the other's direction, swept the single long room of the bunkhouse with a swift glance. With a curse the other jerked the door shut and glared at Talbot. A crooked smile appeared upon Wayne's lips. He had seen all he wanted to—the bunkhouse was empty. But instead of causing him relief the fact worried him.

"Where's th' rest of yuhr gang?" he demanded tartly.

"Wouldn't yuh like tuh know?" sneered the other.

Talbot controlled his uneasiness with difficulty. Johnson had a small army of riders he knew, and the fact that they were all absent but these two, probably left as a body guard to Johnson, portended trouble for his friends. This was not the season for roundups, so he guessed they were out with no good purpose. But he strangled his disquiet and shrugged his shoulders as if the matter were of little importance.

"Reckon they're out tuh raise a little hell tuhnight," he drawled unconcernedly.

But the other man's suspicion had been aroused. He guessed this call of Talbot's was for no good purpose, and interjected hastily, "Th' boys is apt tuh be draggin' in most any time now."

The man's doubts were only too apparent and Talbot knew right off he lied. But he said nothing, stepping to one side so his back was to the log wall of the bunkhouse. At the same time he heard a door slam shut and saw two men hurrying in their direction.

The one in the lead was a short, florid man. Talbot identified him at a glance. This was Johnson, cruel, unscrupulous, as merciless as he was unrelenting. The man was a tyrant one could see from the colossal conceit of his manner.

But Talbot spoiled his confidence right off the reel. "Johnson," he snapped, "I've come tuh square an account with you."

Johnson stared. His man had told him Talbot had riden over to bargain with him, but this attitude of his visitor pointed to a wholly different situation. He stiffened and turned accusing eyes upon the messenger. "I thought yuh said this man wanted tuh talk business with me!" he roared.

Talbot cut in before the rider could say a word in his own defense. "I do, Johnson, but not th' kind of business you have in mind." Talbot had a watchful eye on all three. His hand hovered above the butt of his six-gun. There was a tenseness in his attitude that told he was prepared for any kind of action. "Johnson," Talbot's tone had taken on the brittle quality of ice, "one of yuhr dogs killed a boy, a kid, over in our country. I'm givin' yuh a chance tuh say who!"

Johnson cursed violently. A gasp came from the lips of the man near the door of the bunkhouse. Talbot's eyes shifted quickly in that direction. He noted that Johnson's eyes had also sought instinctively that direction. The gloom was fast falling but still he could distinguish the sudden gray of his features.

"Go tuh hell!" snarled Johnson, swinging back in Talbot's direction, his shoulders hunching, his arms crooked significantly.

"Does that mean yuh back yuhr men in such killin's?" gritted Talbot. He was watching now the man by the bunkhouse, the stronger of the

three. Suspicion that amounted to certainty blazed in his eyes.

Johnson eyed him warily. Through Waite all three knew the reputation of Talbot with a gun. But through superiority of numbers Johnson felt little doubt of the issue. Since Talbot's attitude signified that he had no intention of joining forces with them he must be eliminated. So Johnson answered with the bluntness of truth.

"I've hired these men to clean my range. I'm backing them in whatever they do."

ALL the time he was talking Johnson was edging clear of the man at his side. Talbot was not blind to the action and knew the showdown was about to come. Three to one was severe odds, especially where those three faced him as they did now. But Talbot seemed undisturbed.

"Easy, Johnson," he warned. "Another step an' I'll drop yuh!" None of the three distinguished a movement, yet there was Talbot's gun covering Johnson. Johnson fell back with a smothered exclamation but quickly recovered himself. Johnson was noted for his quick thinking and he outdid himself now. He shook a finger toward the man crouching beside the bunkhouse.

"Tucson there killed that kid!" Johnson gave the information in hopes of drawing the gun from himself and giving him a chance for his own life.

Talbot caught the movement of the exposed man out of the tail of his eye and whirled. The victim's gun was only half out of its holster when he fell with a low moan.

Johnson and the other man went for their guns at the same instant. Talbot threw himself prostrate just as their guns roared, snapping a shot at Johnson as he fell. Johnson recoiled with a horrible curse and doubled up, his face twisted with agony. A third shot Talbot threw while he lay prostrate, simultaneous with the second shot from the third man's gun. Talbot jerked as the bullet tore its way through the fleshy part of his left shoulder. But his third bullet had done its work well. The last man crumpled to earth, stricken.

Talbot scrambled to his feet and inspected each victim in turn. The first and third were dead. Tucson had paid the penalty of his deed. Talbot turned the moaning figure of the big ranchman over with his foot. Johnson was suffering the tortures of the damned. Talbot's bullet had caught him through the stomach. He was bleeding inwardly and the gunman knew death was not far off. But Johnson's agony was terrible to look upon.

Talbot sheathed his gun and and clapped his hand to his blood-soaked shoulder, the pain of his wound grown intense now. The passion had gone from his eyes. He stared at his victim.

"It was you or me, Johnson," he muttered thickly. Presently he let his right hand slide from his shoulder and knelt down beside the stricken man, rolling him back on his side to relieve the agony.

"Johnson!"

Johnson was sinking fast, but at the word his eyes fluttered open. "Water—for God's sake, water!"

Talbot answered the appeal and soon returned from the bunkhouse with a pail and a dipper. He raised the man's head and held the dipper to his lips. The water revived him to some extent. He raised heavily to an elbow.

"Talbot!" he whispered hoarsely.

Talbot bent forward to catch the faint words. "We—both—lost—Talbot! You — got me! But — Lyle—Waite—th' gang—they're — runnin' yuhr—settlers — out — tuh-night!" With that Johnson suddenly dropped back to earth. His body jerked spasmodically, his eyes rolled in a fearful way. Then he straightened out. An expiring sigh passed his blood-flecked lips. Johnson had passed on.

For a long time Talbot sat upon his heels, staring out upon the now heavy gloom, unseeing, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, an unconquerable feeling of defeat stealing over him. In one swift blow all his work had been undone. While he was away on vengeance bound a blow was being struck that sapped the last ounce of his courage. He might have known Waite would lose no time in acting after he, Talbot, had delivered his ultimatum. He dreaded to look upon the result of this night's work.

Yet the need of action stirred and revived him. Forty miles to the line cabin — a tired horse — Talbot groaned aloud in a spirit of anguish. It was impossible for him to reach the scene in time.

THEN his own urgent need made itself known. He had not eaten since that morning. A ride of more than fifty miles gives a man an appetite in spite of the grisly scene before him. Talbot decided he would eat first, then look up the possibilities for a fresh mount. For such a ride as he contemplated to make he needed every ounce of his strength. What he would find at the end—

He started toward the ranch house to see what he could find in the line of something to eat.

A half hour later, he clattered out of the ranch yard on a big, rangy bay bearing the J J brand, his choice of several in the big J J barn and chosen for his evident speed and endurance. Through the black night they tore, heedless of the hidden dangers of holes and deep washes, Talbot beside himself with grief, rage, and anxiety. At midnight he reached his own quarters, undisturbed so far as he could see. And somewhat relieved by this evidence he continued on toward the other settlements.

In a short time he reached the first scene of disaster. Duke Maxom's fence was cut and lay flat upon the ground in a dozen places. Talbot now rode at a relentless pace, desperate, sick at heart. Soon the spot where Duke's cabin had stood hove in sight, now a smouldering ruins. With a passionate curse, Talbot tumbled from his saddle and started kicking among the still smoking embers. He searched in vain for signs of burned bones. Evidently Duke had not been trapped in his cabin.

Again he set forth on a merciless ride. Gray dawn found him still riding, haggard eyed, fierce. His horse stumbled along threatening to drop with exhaustion. His clothes were blood-soaked from his wound. He was growing constantly weaker from loss of blood.

Devastation lay everywhere. Not a building was left standing. Everywhere were smoking ruins, fences torn down, and his friends missing. He had searched each heap of ashes with painstaking care but he found nothing of significance as to the fate of the settlers.

A forlorn hope that they had made good their escape, but still hard to credit was his only consolation. The only gleam of hope at all

was the fact of Lyle's presence with the pack. Gunman, he was, but Talbot knew he was not a wanton killer. There might be a hopeful explanation in his friend's disappearance in this very presence.

Weaving drunkenly in the saddle, so weary that at times his senses threatened to swoon, Talbot at last headed his horse back toward his own cabin. It was high noon when he reached there.

Half blind with fatigue he failed to notice the number of hoof tracks that marked the ground in front of the line cabin. Unconscious of danger he dismounted stiffly, tore the saddle and bridle off his exhausted mount, and staggered toward the cabin. He swung the door back and started to enter.

The roar of a gun nearly deafened him. Talbot staggered back as something tore savagely at his left side. In the same movement he whipped his own gun out and threw a shot in the direction of the flash.

The dull thud of a falling body answered his shot. Talbot instantly forgot his exhaustion. The hot blood of battle once more went coursing through his veins. He leaped to one side and crouched beside the doorway. There came a shifting of feet from within the cabin, so Talbot knew it was occupied by more than one.

He ran swiftly around the cabin to the little square of window at the back. There he took a cautious peek. Within range of his vision crouched four men, their attention centered upon the doorway. A fifth lay sprawled upon the floor. Talbot brought his gun up quickly and started pumping lead within. A riot of confusion followed. Out of the door fled three. The fourth dropped in the doorway. Talbot tore around the corner of the cabin, throwing a shot at the fleeing ambushers. With a shrill yell the leader in the race dropped to earth, shot through the legs. A second time Talbot thumbed the hammer only to have it click on an empty shell.

Talbot hastily jumped back around the corner out of sight and jambed fresh shells into his guns. Then he ducked quickly for the door. A hasty glance at the one sprawled in the doorway and the other within satisfied him they were out of the reckoning. His two sound assailants were streaking it for a nearby draw. The man shot through the legs was dragging himself away like a dog whose hindquarters had suddenly been rendered useless. Then for the first time he noted the number of horse tracks that marked up the yard.

THE ping of a rifle bullet striking a log close to his head called him back to reality. This implied he had more assailants stationed down in the draw. Rolling the body out of the doorway, Talbot snatched up the dead man's gun and dived within, slamming shut and barring the door behind him.

"God, an' my rifle is on my saddle outside!" he muttered. He started toward the door as a perfect fusillade of lead struck it. Talbot recoiled with a violent curse and instantly changed his mind.

He was caught like a rat in a trap. Without a rifle to fight back with, he knew he was in a hopeless predicament. He examined his first victim and quickly filched his six-shooter. But he knew a six-gun was impossible at that range. Then his eyes fell upon the little window and he contemplated it thoughtfully. He considered the possibility of crawl-

ing out of it, slipping around to his saddle, and retrieving his rifle while his enemies were concentrating their fire upon the door. He decided to try it as an only chance.

As he started toward the window another fusillade of lead struck the door making a perfect sieve of it. The lead ended with a vicious thud against the opposite wall. Talbot leaped the remaining distance and crashed a foot through the pane. As a third volley crashed through the door he flung himself headlong through the window.

He paused for a moment at the corner of the cabin to study the situation. The saddle lay in plainer sight of the shooters than he had imagined. It was little short of suicide to attempt to reach it.

But the dismay suddenly cleared from his face. Running to the lean-to he returned in a moment with a lariat. After the second attempt he managed to snag the saddle horn. With an exultant exclamation he snaked the saddle toward him. With the rifle in his hand he started back for the window, pausing only to pick up the ax that lay beside a small pile of wood and toss it through the window ahead of him.

The riflemen had evidently changed their positions, or at least had scattered out on a longer range. The shots were being fired at intervals now instead of in volleys, and were striking the door at different angles. Talbot awoke to this new danger as he started to climb back through the window. A bullet struck the sill and threw splinters in his face. With a low, surprised curse Talbot dropped back to the outer wall. As he did so another bullet whined through the broken window and hit with a vicious thud in the wall of the lean-to.

Standing back within the protection of the log wall he handed the rifle within. Then backing off a few steps he dived headlong through the window. He leaped past the door that was now no more than a mass of splinters, without mishap. Then taking the ax he started digging some of the chinking out of the lower two logs.

"Now then," he muttered, as he lay prostrate and shoved his rifle barrel between the two logs, "we'll see if yuh coyotes is goin' tuh have everything yuhr own way. I reckon I'll go out but I'll go out a fightin'. An' maybe I'll take some of you hellions along with me—just tuh pay yuh for what yuh done tuh my friends!"

For hours the one-sided battle waged furiously. One against a score and Talbot was taking a terrible toll. He shot only when an enemy exposed himself and then with telling effect. Once they attempted to charge him but met with such a withering fire that they were compelled to drop back to the draw again.

Talbot himself was literally shot to pieces. A dozen bullets had already marked his body. What with his loss of blood from the wound he had received at the J J it was incredible, how he could remain at his post and continue shooting.

IN TRUTH Talbot was in a hard situation. He had since reached a state where he could not rise to his knees. And now he was becoming so weak he could scarce press the trigger. His mind commenced to wander. One minute he was cursing and throwing taunts at his enemies, the next crying out in violent protest to Waite.

"God, Lyle, I thought yuh was a

man! I didn't reckon yuh'd fight like this—yuhr pack ag'in one!" Then sober senses would return to him again and he told himself Waite was not with this bunch, that he would never fight like this.

As through a thick mist he suddenly saw a black moving mass. He knew it was about over with him—his enemies were making another charge. He squeezed the trigger only to hear the bolt click on an empty shell. With a despairing curse he dropped his rifle, rolled over and tugged at his six-shooter. The roar of guns now was almost deafening. As he looked through the slot between the logs again he thought that black, moving mass he had first seen had split and was retreating back toward the draw. Then he became aware of the beat and clatter of many hoofs. One of the objects had separated from the others and was riding toward the cabin.

Talbot jerked over and faced toward the now sagging door. He drew his hand across his blood-smeared face to clear his vision. Slowly, with the last ounce of will, he raised his gun. There came the sound of running feet. The door crashed inward and in the opening appeared Lyle Waite, a six-shooter in his hand, his eyes terrible to look upon, his face twisted with a passion almost maniacal.

"Here I am, Lyle!" whispered Talbot hoarsely. Slowly the hammer commenced to raise. But to his surprise the gunman paid him no attention. His eyes were fastened upon the window. Talbot, painfully twisting his head, saw a gun barrel lifting above the sill, pointing in his direction, saw just as Waite's gun spoke. He heard a horrible scream, the thud of a body fallin, then Waite was upon him.

"God, Wayne, I was afraid they'd got yuh! I been ridin like hell tuh get here in time—me an yuhr friends—Why, say, ol' timer, yuh're all shot tuh hell!"

Talbot stared at him, then at the gun in his left hand. He seemed to marvel at this peculiar circumstance. "Say, Lyle," he mumbled, "I always thought yuh was right handed?"

Silently, an odd grin on his lips, Waite held up the bleeding stub of his right hand for Talbot's inspection. The sight seemed to revive Talbot. He stared long at that significant object — the fingers on Waite's gun hand shot away—

Talbot came to with a start, recalled the difficulty with which he had raised his right arm. His eyes fell to it instinctively. A bullet had plowed its way through the cords just above the forearm. Again the eyes of the two gun-fighters met.

"I reckon she's goin' tuh be stiff when she heals up, Wayne," murmured Waite.

Talbot gave him a hard look. "I reckon she will, Lyle. Looks like me an' you has pulled our last gun."

WAITE gravely agreed with him, but there was a flame in his eyes that gave the lie to his gravity. "I reckon there ain't no more reason why me an' you can't —" Waite hesitated, his confusion and embarrassment apparent.

"Can't what, Lyle?" demanded Talbot softly.

"Be friends," blurted Waite desperately.

Talbot evaded an answer although Waite was watching him anxiously.

"Tell me what happened,Lyle."

Waite glared resentfully until he saw the look upon Talbot's face, then he grinned understandingly. "Ain't

much tuh my discredit," he commenced, and plunged headlong into his tale. Other forms appeared in the doorway of the cabin without either man noticing them. Tom Evans in their lead, halted them and bade them be silent.

"After leavin' you yesterday I hit for a camp where I knew most of th' boys was holdin' up. You'd delivered yuhr ultimatum an' I knew it was up tuh me tuh get busy pronto or yuh'd beat me to it. So rustlin' up th' gang we hits out tuh round up these settler-friends of yours an' escort 'em out of th' country. I give every man warnin' that any of 'em that harmed a hair on one of these settler's heads I'd down him.

"Th' roundup was plumb easy. We found 'em all congregated over tuh that fellah's place whose kid was killed. Say Wayne, when I heered about that I got plumb sick. I threatened every man there but they all denied havin' done it. Then one of 'em up an' squeals that Tucson was ridin' over in that country that day an' likely done th' deed. But here I am gettin' off th' trail.

"Like I said we come upon th' whole settlement gathered at this kid's funeral, an' out of respect for th' dead they'd laid aside their weapons. We waited 'til it was all over an' then we sweeps down on 'em, loads 'em on their hosses and wagons an' starts with 'em out of th' country.

"But what is botherin' me is you ain't with this bunch. Some of th' boys is set on goin' back an' huntin' yuh up. That don't suit me a-tall. I'd told 'em before, you was my particular meat. Then they argues me tuh go with 'em. But I can't trust 'em taken' these settlers out.

"They got so downright nasty about it I commenced tuh get leary. There's all them settlers without a gun on 'em. One of th' boys is up ahead drivin' their wagon load of artillery. When they finally get on th' point of mutiny I gotta let 'em go. I guess I'm gettin' soft-hearted, Wayne, but I just couldn't see all them women an' kids murdered. Yet that was th' point it was comin' down to. If I could've got them weapons back in yuhr friends' hands I'd a sure done it an' we'd a fought it out right there. But that weren't possible either.

"I'd sure begun tuh regret my hasty actions an' wish I'd left them settlers in their homes. I commenced tuh see things in yuhr light an' it made me feel mighty small an' onery. We'd already burned their homes so I figgered it was too late now tuh renege.

"You wasn't born yesterday an' I knowed yuh was pretty much able tuh take care of yuhrself. Anyhow I decided yuh'd have tuh until I could get around tuh lend yuh a hand. So I sent th' critters back. I told 'em all could go that wanted to as I could handle these settlers so long as they weren't armed. They all went except th' fellah drivin' th' wagon with th' guns.

"After thy'd gone I got tuh thinkin' harder'n ever, an th' more I thought th' more like a low-down skunk I felt. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer—rememberin' what yuh'd done for me that time—an' I calls a halt. It's a hard job but I manages tuh unload all my troubles to yuhr friends. Wayne, I didn't know there was such white people livin'. They're willin' an' glad tuh overlook everything if I'll just agree tuh let 'em go back.

"Did I? Say, I never was so glad tuh get out of a rotten scrape. I see right off what a raw deal you folks

was gettin' an' I changed my colors in a hurry. I rides up tuh th' wagon an' gets th' drop on th' driver while yuhr friends get back their weapons. Then we calls a meetin' tuh devise ways an' means of goin' tuh yuhr rescue.

"Come tuh find out you'd gone on th' trail of that kid's murderer. Well, I knew Tucson was at th' J J, an' I figgered that'd be th' first place you'd ride. So I tell th' bunch I'd ride over tuh th' ranch while they fanned th' breeze back tuh th' line cabin.

"I'll admit, Wayne, I fair rode th' tail off my hoss. I got tuh th' ranch, seen the bodies, an' knowed yuh'd been there an' done a good job. Man, I'd a give a lot tuh see that fight! I stopped long enough tuh catch me up a fresh hoss. I caught up with yuhr friends about a mile back. We drove off the rest of the gang that was fightin' you. That's when I got my fingers shot off—an' here I am."

WITHOUT a word Talbot stretched forth his left hand. Waite accepted it eagerly, pressed it hard. "Does that mean we're goin' tuh be friends?" he demanded.

"More than that—if yuh want tuh be," came back Talbot huskily. "Lyle, let's me an' you go intuh th' cattle business an' quit this hellin' around — be partners — " Talbot broke off, ashamed of his emotion.

Waite said nothing but gripped the other's hand the harder.

Funny, the way things work out. Take Lyle Waite and Wayne Talbot, for instance. Both of them were square shooters, honest-to-God buckaroos, the kind of men you'd be proud to ride the river with. They thought heaps of each other, too. And this was one time they let each other know it.

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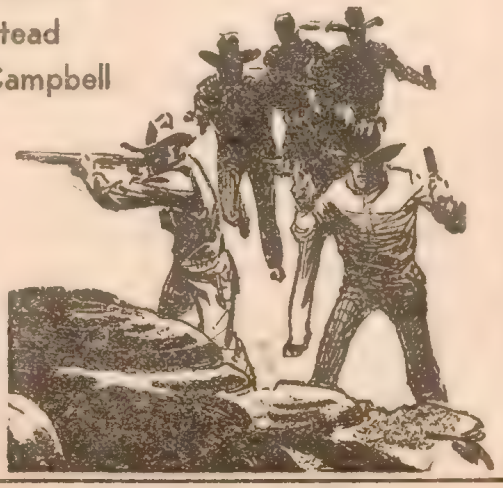

LAW FOR THE LAWLESS

by LARRY HARRIS

A crooked sheriff runs into six-gun trouble when he tangles his crooked loop with a straight shootin' law-ridin' waddy.

JABBERING, excited voices from the main street in Pinos Altos drifted up to Tim Hardy's little law office on the second floor of one of the weather-beaten, false-fronted buildings. Hardy heard it and rose from his swivel chair. At the window he peered out into the gloom of early night.

Three riders were just coming into town. Hardy spotted them and his tall, broad-shouldered body stiffened. Something told him Pinos Altos was going to see a hanging. One of those three riders down there was going to hang. That man was John Crow, an Indian.

Tim Hardy turned. He strode

hurriedly across his office to the door that opened out on a stairway. Down at the foot of the stairs, on the plank walk, a crowd of curious people had quickly gathered. Hardy caught the significance of their buzzing conversation—guessed the rest.

He went quickly down the steps. The three horsemen were drawing nearer. Leading the other two riders was Sheriff "Tonto" Belden, a smirking grin curling his thick lips. He waved aside the torrent of questions hurled at him.

"Git yoreself a redskin, Sheriff?" a spectator bawled.

Somebody laughed. It didn't sound pleasant. But Big Sheriff Belden's grin broadened in high good humor.

"Yeah," he boomed. "I got the redskin that's been doin' all the stealin'."

Across the street in front of the Antelope Saloon a reeling gent yelled, "Purty lucky, Sheriff. Spose yuh'll buy a few drinks with the five-thousand dollar reward."

Sheriff Belden didn't answer the man. He saw he was drunk. The cowmen along the plank walk didn't ask funny questions. It was a grim matter with them. In a desperate effort to put a halt to the thieving in the valley they had pooled a five thousand dollar reward for the capture of the rustler—any rustler. And now Sheriff Belden was going to claim that money.

An angry yell came from one of the onlookers. It was taken up by the others. The Indian at Sheriff Belden's side didn't turn his head. It wasn't pleasant for John Crow. He had a hemp rope around his neck, the end dallying around the Sheriff's silver-trimmed kak horn. Behind him on a prancing palimino rode Deputy Duke Grant, smiling thinly, the black mustache above his lipless

Tim Hardy stepped off the plank walk as the horsebackers drew opposite him.

"Just a minute, Sheriff."

Sheriff Belden drew rein, stopping his deputy and the prisoner. He had heard Hardy even above the hubbub. He looked down, grinned mockingly.

"Shore, Hardy," he rumbled obligingly.

In the growing dusk, Tim Hardy looked up into the expressionless features of the Indian rancher, whose dark eyes were seething with indignation, hate.

"What's wrong, John?"

John Crow shrugged hopelessly. "The law, she say I steal beef, Teem," he said woodenly.

CROW'S lips clamped. He looked straight ahead. Tim Hardy knew John Crow. Right now he might as well try to get a totem pole to talk. Hardy's blue eyes slitted, thinking fast. He saw the sneer on Deputy Duke Grant's lips. Saw him wink at the crowd of silent onlookers lining the walk. Sheriff Belden, huge body draped in the kak, grinned unpleasantly, his black beady eyes lighting with triumph.

"John Crow's one Indian yore slick court talk ain't gonna help, Hardy!" Belden rasped, glaring. Then he looked at the gaping crowd, raised his voice to a bellow. "Maverickin' an' beef-thievin' is gonna stop now! I been readin' the sign it was this here Indian. Pertendin' to be a prosperous cowman like you white gents an' stealin' beef at night. You gents been bawlin' yore heads off for me to stop the hell on this range. Well, I done it now! I'm collectin' that five thousand reward. Me'n Grant just rode up on old Crow stealin' some Lazy-L stuff. Stealin'

from Madge Layton—a woman—!"

Tim Hardy's tall frame jerked rigid at the mention of the name Madge Layton. Sheriff Belden's mighty voice thundered on, coming from deep in his barrel chest. And at his back, Deputy Grant grinned. Grant was handsome in a cruel sort of way. He knew it. And now that he was receiving a lot of attention it pleased him a lot. His furtive, gray eyes roved over the crowd that was edging closer.

Tim Hardy cursed himself for being a fool. He shouldn't have made a scene here in the middle of town. He was playing into Belden's hands. That's what Belden wanted — a show! He was cleverly lashing the crowd into a hanging frenzy—and making himself a hero by doing it!

"Belden, he lies, Teem."

Blue eyes flaming, Hardy looked up at the Indian who was masking his emotions behind a cold, leathery mask. Hardy heard him above the muttering of the crowd that surged closer about them.

"Stand back, gents!" Belden bawled, waving dramatically. "You'll git quick justice. But we'll have to let the law take its course. . ."

Flourishing a pearl-handled six-gun in one hand, he gigged his horse forward through the angry mob that was yelling for a neck-tie party. Belden, with his white Stetson and short-topped, two-color boots looked more like a rodeo performer on parade than a lawman bringing in a prisoner. Behind him rode the Indian, sullen tight-lipped. Behind him rode Deputy Duke Grant, pretentiously waving back the crowd that tromped after him. Dust rose into the gloom from beneath the slogging boots.

Still standing at the edge of the plank walk, Tim Hardy watched the two lawmen and the prisoner until they pulled up in front of the 'dobe jail farther down the street. As they went inside the jail he turned back to the stairs that led up to his office. The mockery of the whole affair rankled him, kindling anew the hate and suspicion he had felt for Tonto Belden. He knew Sheriff Belden. Had known him since the blustering, loud-mouthed lawman had swaggered into the valley eight years ago from Oklahoma and managed to get himself elected sheriff.

Hardy knew the sneering, sullen deputy who worked hand in hand with Belden. And now range-bred Tim Hardy was sign-wise enough to know that the enactment of Belden's show just now had a deeper meaning than just bringing an Indian to justice.

Pushing through the door into his office, Hardy fumbled into the pockets of his dark business suit for a match. He'd finish what business he had, then head for the jail to get more details from Crow. He'd have to work fast. Sheriff Belden had subtlely aroused the cowmen to a hanging frenzy. Belden wanted them to hang John Crow—pronto! And judging from the howling mob down in front of the jail at the moment, Belden was going to get his wish.

Hardy struck a match, touched it to the lamp that was on his desk. As the lamp flared, a stir came from the doorway. Hardy whirled. Just inside the door stood a girl, dressed in faded denims and scuffed cowhide boots. Beneath the brim of her Stetson her face was pale. Stark fright shone in her dark eyes.

"Mary!" said Hardy.

She closed the door at her back, glided silently across the room.

"Tim!" she cried. "You've—you've heard about dad—"

Tim Hardy nodded grimly. "I know, Mary."

She laid a small hand on Hardy's coat sleeve, looking up beseechingly into his face. She was trying desperately to keep her red lips from trembling, to keep the tears from flooding her eyes.

THEN she broke, sobbing miserably. Mary Crow wasn't endowed with the stoical calm of her father whom they were going to hang for rustling. Hardy put a tender arm about her shoulders, as if she were a child. That's what she was to Tim Hardy—a child. He thought a lot of her. Thought a lot of old John Crow, too, who had come mysteriously out of the Mogollon country fifteen years ago, bringing with him his little breed daughter and a poke of gold. He had bought a small cow spread with that gold. It adjoined the Mescalero Reservation just west of town. He did it, he had told Hardy, so he could be near his own people, the Apaches. And since then he had quietly minded his own business of breeding good cattle and pinto ponies.

It only seemed like yesterday to Hardy that he used to see Mary Crow drive into town with her father to buy supplies. She had always made it a point to drop in to see Hardy. Small as she was then, she seemed to realize that Hardy thought no less of her because she was a breed. Hardy would buy her stick candy that came in red and white sticks and laughingly rawhide her about her pigtails. She'd been just a gangling kid then in a gingham dress, worshipped by her primitive father.

Hardy had watched her grow up, becoming prettier each day. She didn't have the facial characteristics of an Indian. There had been too much laughter in her dark eyes, too ready a smile to her lips. Gossip in Pinos Altos had it that Mary's mother had been white. And though John Crow had confided much in Tim Hardy, he had never mentioned his past life.

Now the startling realization came to Tim Hardy that Mary Crow was no longer a gangling kid with pigtails down her back, but a beautiful girl fully blossomed into womanhood. It made him feel old, someway. Yet he was only thirty. Mary was just out of her teens.

Her sobs stopped. Embarrassedly, she stepped back. She smiled bravely, brushed the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Tim," she said awkwardly. "I'm—I'm just a little fool —acting like this."

Hardy laughed a little. He knew his body was trembling. And he didn't know why.

"You've — you've been like a brother to me, Tim," she said simply. "I don't know what we'd—my people would do without you, Tim." Then a flame crept into her eyes. "I wish everybody was like you. Do you suppose the white people will ever be nice to us? Why don't they leave us alone?"

"Cut it, pigtails. You'll have me stirrin' up a war. Cryin' will make yore eyes red. The big ceremony begins tonight over at the Reservation, I'll have yore dad out in time for that."

"Tim!" she cried apprehensively. "I heard some of those—those men out there say they were going to hang dad—"

"They won't, Mary," Hardy gritted softly. "I'm goin' to see that they don't."

"I can't understand it all," she whispered bitterly. "Dad — he's no

thief! You know that, Tim! One of the men just rode out to the ranch—told me they had dad up for stealing beef. I know he didn't! I just know he didn't!" Her voice was fired with defiance, eyes flashing. "Something's wrong! Sheriff Belden hates us, I know. Hates all—Indians! He's been out to the ranch a half a dozen times lately trying to get us to sell the place. The last time he scared me the way he kept looking at me, Tim. He brought along a jug of whiskey and when dad wouldn't drink with him Belden began cussing us."

Thoughts swirled through Hardy's mind that puzzled him. So Sheriff Belden had tried to buy Crow's Big Foot spread. Why? Belden knew nothing of the cow business. He wasn't the type to go in for ranching. He'd rather strut around town with a star pinned on his vest.

"You ride on back to yore ranch, Mary," Hardy said grimly. "I'll get to the bottom of this. We'll save yore dad. Quit worryin', pigtails."

Mary Crow had all the confidence in the world in Tim Hardy. She showed it now as she looked up at him. Her dark eyes softened for the moment, the misery replaced by a fighting courageousness. Hardy put his arm about her slender waist, walked with her to the door.

"I know you'll help dad, Tim," she said softly. She said it like a child. "I'm not worrying now. And I promise I won't."

"Good," said Hardy, and smiled.

She fled to the door, ran down the stairs to the dark street below where she had left her horse. Hardy, worry flickering into his eyes, turned back toward the desk for his hat.

All had become quiet out in the street once more. But Hardy knew that it was just the lull before the storm. He knew that Sheriff Belden would see to it that John Crow stood trial. Before midnight Belden would buy drinks in the Antelope Saloon across the street. Once the cowmen of the saloon were drunk, he would fire them to a hanging, and he would remain conspicuously absent while they swarmed down on the jail and strung John Crow up to a cottonwood. If Tim Hardy was reading sign right, Belden had some reason for wanting John Crow dead!

Hardy put on his Stetson. He whirled, surprised, when a woman's chill words cut through the silence of the small office.

"Hello, Tim, dear!"

Chapter II

SOME of the stiffness left Hardy's body when he spoke. Cool, self-reliant Madge Layton stood there in the doorway, watching him.

She couldn't keep the sneer out of her low voice when she said: "Your interest in that little breed girl seems to be growing, Tim. Don't tell me you've turned Indian lover."

She smiled icily. A deep flush swept over Hardy's lean face. He saw something in Madge Layton's flashing eyes he had never seen before. Somehow in that brief moment, he couldn't help but compare dazzling Madge Layton with Mary Crow. And Mary Crow in all her child-like simplicity stood high in that comparison.

Hardy hadn't heard Madge Layton come up the outside steps. But she stood there now, her attractive face like white marble. She was dressed in expensive whipcord riding breeches and English boots. Pulled low over her blonde hair was a cream-colored Stetson.

"You shouldn't talk like that," Hardy reprimanded gently, stepping

toward her. "You know better than to say things like that, Madge honey. Mary—"

"I know, Tim," said the girl cooly. I've been standing out on the stairway, in the dark. I heard most of what was said."

She allowed Hardy to take her hands in his. Her fingers were long, cold. Her lips were a trifle too red. Hardy forgot his sudden feeling of anger at her cutting words. It was always like that when he was around Madge Layton. He forgot everything except her dazzling loveliness—and that she had promised to marry him.

Hardy grinned. It made him look younger when he did that. "Shucks, honey, you forget Mary. Why, she seems like a—why a kid sister to me."

The temporary smile left Madge Layton's lips. "Mary Crow is an Indian, Tim," she said pointedly.

A different look came into Hardy's blue eyes. "That makes no difference to me, Madge."

"I didn't think it did, Tim. That's what I've been hearing."

Hardy dropped her hands, his face hardening at her insinuation. He bit back what he wanted to say and strove to hide his feelings. He looked down into the cold smiling face of this poised, calm woman and saw things in her real character that he had been blind to before.

A few years ago her doting parents had died of pneumonia, leaving her the Lazy-L. Madge Layton was a pampered woman who had been accustomed to having things her own way. Hardy had grown up with her on the Pinos Altos range. Then Tim Hardy's parents had died and the little spread they had owned had been eaten up by the mortgage. Hardy had gone east, studied law, working his way through school. When he had returned to open a law office in Pinos Altos, he had found Madge Layton grown up, a domineering, beautiful woman, hating John Crow and his daughter whose spread adjoined hers. Hardy knew there had been water difficulties between the two ranches but he had never given it much thought.

"I'm sorry you feel like you do about it, Madge," he said quietly. "You'd better go now. I've got some business ahead of me."

Madge Layton said without smiling: "I just wanted to tell you we're through, Tim—unless you stay out of this John Crow trouble."

"What do yuh mean, Madge?"

"Just that," she said.

Then she must have realized she was asking too much. She laid a hand on Hardy's shoulder, looked up pleadingly, bringing into play all her dazzling qualities.

"Can't you see what a fool you're making of yourself, Tim? Everybody is talking about it. Mary Crow is—is just a little squaw! This evening Sheriff Belden and his deputy rode up and caught her father stealing some of my beef. He claimed I offered to donate it for the barbecue at the reservation tonight. Sheriff Belden says John Crow is responsible for all the rustling that has been going on in the valley. He—"

"Please go, Madge."

HARDY'S voice was low, patient. Stiffly he stood in front of the girl, looking straight over her head.

Madge Layton's hand dropped from his shoulder. Her eyes flamed. Then a slow smile came to her red lips, mirthless and cold.

"Just forget what I've said, Mister Hardy," she snapped. "Go ahead, squawman, and put on your warpaint."

Then she was hurrying to the door, slamming it shut behind her. Hardy made no move. Thoughts in turmoil, he listened to her run down the outsteps to the street. In the dull lamp-glow his face was hard.

Then with sudden decision he moved across the room to a wall peg that held a cartridge-studded belt and holstered gun. Years ago he had worn that gun. That was before Colt law had been replaced by court law in the valley. That was when he had poked cows on his father's spread, and his hands had been calloused from the burn of a forty-foot hemp rope.

Strapping the belt about his waist beneath his coat, he blew out the lamp, strode purposefully out of his office. Across the dark street the dirty windows of the Antelope Saloon shone with light. The smell of cooking food drifted into the night air from the chink restaurant farther down the street. Down the way the barred windows of the office in the front of the jail sent shafts of lamp-glow out into the gloom.

Hardy tensed, eyes scanning the dark deserted street. Saddled horses stood at the tie-poles. More horses than usual it seemed. A tingling premonition shot through Hardy. He hearkened a moment to the muted, whiskey-hoarse voices that filtered from the saloon. The very air seemed laden with the ominous tranquility that presages trouble. Hell was going to pop! Tonight!

Hardy had taken but a dozen steps when some sixth sense flashed him a warning. He stopped, right hand dropping to the butt of his gun. A figure stirred in the gloom just ahead of him.

"Tim!"

It was Mary Crow, voice edged with excitement. She had been standing in the shadows between two of the frame buildings. Hardy peered at her quizzically as she ran up to him.

"Where you going, Tim?"

"Down to the jail to get yore father released, Mary."

She started at the sound of his voice. Her eyes dropped quickly to the gun beneath his coat.

"Tim!" she cried softly. "You've got to go back. Something is going to happen. I feel it! Somebody will be killed. I'm sorry I asked you to help. Just forget it. Forget me. I'll—I'll help dad some way—"

"Yore dad needs my help, Mary," Hardy snapped sternly. "It's goin' to take more than just talkin' to help him."

"Tim!" the girl pleaded desperately. "Stay out of this! I saw Madge Layton go into your office just now. I know she hates me. Please, Tim!"

Hardy wanted to tell this little Indian girl a lot of things. But he didn't. Instead, he hurried on down the street toward the jail. There was a lump in his throat, a bitterness assailing him that flung his thoughts into turmoil. He didn't look back. And he tried not to listen to the broken sobs that came from Mary Crow as she ran blindly through the darkness in the opposite direction.

Chapter III

AT THE tie-rack in front of the jail stood a saddled horse. Inside, under the guttering oil lamp on the wall, sat a weasel-faced little gent behind the battered roll-topped desk. There was a deputy's star on his sagging vest. His rat-eyes kept darting from the face of the man who sat opposite him to the front door. He was talking in an awed voice while he rolled a quirly. His thin fingers trembled. He stopped, head canting to one side.

Fear flicked into his eyes.

"Listen. . . ." he said in a hushed tone.

The man opposite him listened, hunched forward in his straight-backed chair.

"Nothin'," he said. "They're still down at the Antelope."

Weasel-Face finished rolling his smoke. He wet his lips and struck a match across the desk.

"I asked yuh to come set with me while Belden an' Grant's gone, Jake. I didn't want to git lonesome."

"Yo're just scairt, that's all," the man said.

Weasel-Face moistened his lips again. His right hand fingered the gun holstered to his scrawny hip.

"I guess so," he admitted.

"Guess so, hell! Yuh know so."

"Well, yuh see I ain't never seen a man hung. Course Crow is a Indian. They'll be here perty soon, stormin' in that there front door. Belden said they would an' he said he couldn't be here. That's why he swore me in, just to stay here tonight. The saloon crowd is goin' to do it. Belden bought plenty of drinks just before he left. Listen."

Jake's head jerked toward a ticking clock on the wall. "Five minutes till nine," he said softly. "Five minutes yet."

Weasel-Face squirmed in his chair, right hand lifting to brush his thin face. Just then the door banged inward. Weasel-Face jumped as if he had been shot, a wild, startled look popping his eyes out of their sockets. A hissing sound came past his parted lips. Jake was on his feet, hands freezing in the gun snatch.

Tim Hardy stood just inside the room. He kicked the door shut behind him. There was a six-gun in his right fist. Tim Hardy didn't look much like the quiet-mannered, soft-spoken lawyer of Pinos Altos now. His slitted eyes were like slivers of ice.

"I heard what yuh said just now, Weasel," he said flatly. "Where's Belden an' Grant?"

Weasel's twitching face gained back some color. He flung a tortured glance at his companion, then back to Hardy.

"Damn it, Hardy!" he tried to bluster, imitating Belden. "You can't get away with this! See, I'm a deputy, guardin' the prisoner. Ain't that so, Jake?"

Hardy didn't wait to see what Jake had to say. Jaw muscles bunching, he took a quick step nearer the two men.

"Listen, yuh two skunks!" he bit out. "Claw the air! Court law is dead in Pinos Altos. I'm meetin' the occasion by goin' back to the weapons that fetched peace to this valley once —guns! Now start talkin', Weasel—pronto—or it's lead through yore belt buckle."

Cringing back, stark terror in his eyes, Weasel's blubbering words came out. "I don't know nothin', Hardy," he croaked. "Belden an' Grant fogged outa here for Madge Layton's Lazy-L. They left me here to guard the prisoner. An' I got Jake here to set up with me. Didn't I, Jake?"

Jake couldn't seem to find his voice. He nodded dumbly, still staring at Hardy, hands in the air. Hardy took another gliding step forward. From the open desk he snatched up a big ring of keys. Then he prodded the two men hurriedly toward an inner door that led into the jail corridor at the rear of the building.

"Take these keys, Weasel!" he gritted. "You know what I want. Work fast!"

"Shore, yuh want John Crow," Weasel mouthed.

They went into the dimly-lit corridor where the iron-barred doors stood side by side. Hardy laughed harshly. "Good guessin', Weasel," he muttered. "Yo're gettin' smart."

In front of the cell door that led into John Crow's cell, Weasel fumbled with the key in the huge lock. He flung open the door, mumbling his fear. Out of the dark cell John Crow moved like a shadow. Hardy didn't much more than glance at him. He was busy lifting the guns from the two men's holsters. Then he shoved them into the empty cell, slammed the door shut, locked it. He tossed the ring of keys toward the far end of the corridor.

"Hurry, John!"

"I'm with you, Teem."

JOHN CROW'S voice was still emotionless. But in the dull light his eyes smoldered with new hope as they ran toward the front office.

Hardy handed the Indian the guns he had taken off Weasel and Jake as they banged out the front door. Down the dark street toward them surged a trampling, yelling mob of men, like a pack of wolves on the kill. They spotted Hardy and John Crow, started running, their angry yells filling the night.

A gun blared, red flame biting the gloom. Another. Lead whined close to Hardy, smacking dully into the 'dobe wall of the jail. He shoved John Crow toward the single horse at the tie-rack.

"Fog it, John!" he yelled. "Hit for the reservation. Don't worry about me!"

Hardy was already dashing around the corner of the jail as John Crow hit leather in one flying leap. Down the street he roared, bent low over the pony's withers. Gun-thunder from the pursuing mob rose above the tumultuous shouts and the hammer of hoofs. Then John Crow was lost in the darkness. And down an alleyway behind the jail, Tim Hardy sprinted through the darkness, the yells of the pursuing men ringing in his ears.

"It's Colt Law now, Belden!" he gritted fiercely as he ran. "You asked for it. Now yo're goin' to get it!"

Chapter IV

SUDDENLY, Tim Hardy stopped running, flattened himself against the wall of one of the frame buildings. He caught the flutter of horses' hoofs bearing down on him. His heart pounded against his chest. He scanned the gloom back in the direction of the jail.

Out of the night two racing horses took shape. There was only one rider, bent far over the lead horses's neck, holding the reins of the second horse. A familiar voice cried out above the drumming hoof-beats. Mary Crow's voice, wrought with anxiety.

"Tim!" she cried frantically. "Tim!"

Hardy leaped out of the shadows directly in front of her. A tiny cry escaped her as she slid her bronc to a halt.

"Pigtails!"

"Hurry, Tim!" I was hidden outside the jail when you and dad came out."

Hardy leaped astride the second horse, thrilling to the breed girl's words, her grim courage. Here was a girl with nerve! Like the women before her who fought beside their menfolks in the building of this frontier empire. She had grabbed a couple of horses—followed him.

Back at the jail the drunken mob was banging in and out of the build-

ing. They had discovered Weasel and his companion now. Hardy could tell by their cries. In another few minutes they would be searching the town.

"Got to hurry, Mary!" Hardy rapped softly. "Come on!"

Stirrup to stirrup they raced their broncs out of town. Hardy hipped around in the kak, looked back. Far behind them in the darkness now Pinos Altos was a cluster of dark buildings with twinkling lights here and there.

Safety of the open range lay ahead of them. But Tim Hardy wasn't thinking of his own safety right now. He was thinking of what Weasel had told him. Sheriff Belden and Duke Grant had ridden out to Madge Layton's Lazy-L ranch. Why? Hardy made up his mind to find out. Dreadful suspicions surged through him.

His mind raced over all that had happened. There'd be a lot more happen before the morning sun topped the eastern rim of the Guadalupes. He thought of Madge Layton. Why had she been so anxious to keep him out of the John Crow trouble?

Hardy flung aside his tormenting, puzzling thoughts. Giving his bronc free rein, he looked back at the girl. In the darkness her eyes met his, held. Hardy grinned. She answered him with a game smile.

"To the Lazy-L, Mary!" he yelled.

Mary Crow nodded. Overhead a half moon peeped out from behind drifting clouds, daubing a hazy gray light over the valley. Just ahead loomed the Guadalupes, their jumbled peaks silhouetted against the sky. Blotched shadows of night dropped over the rough gorges that cut into the foothills. On the higher slopes the scrub oaks and pines made a black blanket. Lazy-L range!

They shot their broncs up out of a dry wash, topped a brush-dotted ridge. Hardy pointed to a cluster of ranch buildings down below them. He heeled his horse into the lead, heading straight for the main ranch house where a light shone at the windows.

At a bronc pen two hundred yards from the house, Hardy wheeled up short, Mary Crow at his heels. Three saddled horses stood at the portico of the house. In the pale moonlight Hardy caught the glint of silver trimmings on one of the kaks. Sheriff Belden's horse! The other two were Duke Grant's and Madge Layton's.

Hardy slipped quickly from the saddle. He didn't look at Mary Crow as he told her to stay with the horses. He didn't see the frightened look come into her dark eyes. Silently, he darted through the moonlight toward the house. Instead of going to the front door he moved up to one of the front room windows. The blind was only half drawn. He didn't exactly relish the idea of eavesdropping. But in this instance, he told himself, it was necessary.

Then Hardy's body stiffened. In the shadows beneath the window he crouched, breath bated. In the front room Madge Layton, Duke Grant and Sheriff Belden stood before a crackling fire in the fireplace. The sheriff was staring at the flames, talking, his voice barely audible to Hardy.

"You two got everything yuh wanted," he grumbled. "I was just thinkin' that five thousand pool reward I'll git ain't very much." Belden had been drinking. His voice showed it.

The flickering shadows from the flames played over Madge Layton's cold white face. Grant's face was dark, his thin black mustache moving as his lips furled into a sneer. He

eyed the sheriff contemptuously.

"Yo're goin' to take it an' like it, Belden," he said softly.

BELDEN looked up quickly at his deputy and started a retort. Madge Layton stopped him.

"Listen, Belden," she blazed. "I'm sick of the whole deal to say the least! You were to get the reward money for putting that Indian in his place. At the same time cover up some of your petty rustling in the valley. It was your idea! You promised you wouldn't let John Crow hang —that you'd just get him sent up for a few years. When his place was put up for the taxes I was going to buy it. Certainly I always wanted his place, because of the water. Now you come roaring out here and let it slip that your drunken pals are going to hang Crow. I just don't like that part of it, big-mouth. Sabe?"

Linned against the flames, big Sheriff Belden's huge frame shook like a mighty tree in the wind. Fury flushed his heavy-jowled face, burned in his eyes.

"You can't talk to me like that!" he roared. "I'll—"

"Shut up, Belden."

Grant's icy low words throttled Belden's threat. Grant was the killer type. Hate shone in his milky gray eyes. He wasn't handsome now as his eyes locked with Belden's.

"You heard me, Belden," he repeated smoothly. "Shut up." His voice was deadly cold. "Madge is right. When we agreed to yore filthy game you didn't tell us it meant murder. I'm through, get me? Madge an' I are marryin', selling out, an' clearin' out for new parts. She didn't send that note to John Crow offerin' to donate beef to the reservation tonight. I did it. I copied her handwritin' an' she didn't know anything about it. I—"

"Duke!" Madge cried. "You shouldn't have done that!"

"I know, Madge," Grant honeyed.

Rage bloated Belden's face. He shook a huge fist in his deputy's face. "Damn you, Grant!" he blatted hoarsely. "If you ever squeal—"

"Get out, Belden!" Grant's right hand moved, lightning fast. His gun poked into the bug-eyed sheriff's belly. "Get out," he repeated softly, "before I kill yuh!"

Belden, trembling with fury, stomped half way to the door. The clatter of hoof-beats outside the door stopped him. Boot heels clumped swiftly across the portico. The front door burst open.

Weasel stood there, outlined against the night outside. His popping, fear-filled eyes darted over the room—from Duke Grant and the girl to the bewildered sheriff.

"Belden!" he croaked. "He—he—"

Belden roared like a bull. "Talk, damn it!"

Weasel's head flopped up and down on his thin shoulders. "Tim Hardy, he made me let Crow loose! They hit for the—the reservation—"

Cursing, Belden whirled on Grant and the girl. "Hear that, Grant!" he bellowed. "We got to git that Indian now. He savvies too much!"

Duke Grant grinned indifferently, his right hand still holding the leveled gun. Belden read the meaning of that grin and barged out of the house with Weasel running at his heels, whimpering meaningless words.

Chapter V

STILL hidden in the shadows beneath the window, Tim Hardy watched Sheriff Belden and Weasel as they roared across the moonlit expanse of brush, heading for the reservation.

A blinding nausea swept over

Hardy. Dully he heard the muted voices of Madge Layton and Grant. They were still in the front room, talking, low-voiced. Hardy turned from the window. He didn't want to see any more. Didn't want to hear any more. He felt sick. His body was trembling.

He moved away from the house, out into the moonlight. It didn't matter who saw him now. Nothing mattered a hell of a lot but saving old John Crow's life. He'd do that—some way! Then he'd leave the valley, try to forget.

He came up to the corral where he had left Mary Crow with the horses. So intent had he been with his own thoughts he hadn't seen the Indian girl glide through the brush back to the horses ahead of him. When he came up she was already on her horse. He flung himself into the kak. He looked at her and laughed softly. There wasn't anything pleasant about that laugh. It was too metallic.

"Yo're always around waitin' for me, ain't yuh, Pigtails?" he said quietly.

"I like to, Tim," she said softly, a slight quiver in her voice. She was looking out across the expanse of dark brush. Hardy didn't see the mist in her eyes.

"Can't seem to get rid of you, can I, Pigtails?" he grinned.

"Guess not, Tim."

He heeled his pony, heading across the basin in the direction taken by Belden and Weasel-Face. He didn't ride fast. He wanted to think. The cool night air felt good on his hot cheeks. He looked at Mary Crow who rode by his side and found himself thinking how pretty she was.

"You weren't with the horses all the time were yuh, Mary?" he asked.

Looking straight ahead she shook her head. "No, Tim, I left the horses an' followed you to the house. I was afraid. I heard everything from the window on the other side of the house."

Hardy laughed shortly. "Then you know what a damned fool I've been."

"You're not the damned fool, Tim," Mary Crow said simply. "She is."

They rode on in silence. Then Hardy suddenly stoped short.

"Listen, Mary!" he clipped. "We've got to save yore Dad! Belden has the start on us. Head for the reservation!"

Mary Crow had apparently forgotten her father's danger for the time. "The short-cut through Devil's Canyon, Tim," she cried.

"I've got a plan, Pigtails!" Hardy yelled. "Hurry!"

They roared through the moonlit night, lashing their ponies to the limit. Across dry washes, out of the basin their broncs hammered, up a slope dotted with dark scrub-oak. Then they swung down into a gloomy, rock-clustered canyon where sheer walls of stone rose on two sides of them a hundred feet high.

Twenty minutes later they shot their tiring horses down a pine-studded slope toward the floor of a valley where huge campfires shot flames high into the dark heavens, Around those fires figures moved like so many ants. Near to those fires stood a huge log building, windows shining with. light. There were other smaller log buildings, people moving about them, in and out of the fire-glow.

As Tim Hardy sped his bronc down into the valley, he formulated a plan. He knew those people down there. They were the sons and daughters of Geronimo. Primitive people in many ways, with a stern sense of justice. They had been conquered by the white man, herded on

this reservation to spend the remainder of their lives raising corn and tobacco.

Those people still preferred their goat-skinned tepees to the little frame houses the government built for them. They lived simply, according to their own code, stoically submitting to the white man's control. Honesty with them was as inherent as their belief in a Supreme Power. They'd had their petty disputes among themselves, of course. Sometimes over a paint pony or a beaded basket. And when such disputes arose, Tim Hardy had gone among them and settled their differences.

THEY LIKED Tim Hardy, those Indians down there. They often brought him in hammered silver trinkets and blankets. And each autumn, when they held their ceremonial dance here at the reservation, Hardy attended. He had laughed with them throughout the day and night. He had watched their untamed wild spirit come to the fore as the warriors, their half-naked bodies painted a ghastly white, danced around the camp-fires to the beat of the tom-toms. Time and again he had listened to the weird chants of the medicine men, in supplication to their God against the Evil Spirit.

Each year those Indians held their ceremonial. A day and a night each year they forgot the yoke of the white man. Their primitive natures were released. Mary Crow always joined them, a shy little creature who watched with awe as the other women paraded about the camp-fires with ollas balanced on their heads.

Tim Hardy recalled all this as his bronc pounded past the fires toward the main log building. He paid no heed to the half-naked figures who stopped in their dance to stare after him in wonder.

At the steps of the Agency building, Hardy flung himself from his lathered horse. He was through the front door as Mary Crow wheeled up behind him. In the huge front room Hardy saw John Crow. He was standing beside a flat-topped desk, talking earnestly to a man behind it.

Those men saw Tim Hardy at the same time. They started. The red-haired gent behind the desk came quickly to his feet. He strode hurriedly across the room toward Hardy. Their hands clasped.

"Tim! John's been tryin' to tell me. What's happened?"

John Crow came across the carpeted floor to them. His face was still as void of emotion as stained saddle leather.

"You do enough to help me, Teem. By dam' when the law comes I geeve myself up to her."

"Just a minute, John," Hardy rapped, face hardening. He turned to the red-haired gent. "We got to talk fast an' think faster, Mike. Sheriff Belden will be here in a minute. Come back to yore office."

"Shore, Tim," the red-haired man agreed. "You, John—you stay right here. If yo're innocent the law's not goin' to lay a finger on you!" He nodded grimly toward Mary Crow who had entered the room and stood now with her back to the door. "Stay with Mary."

John Crow nodded. Tim Hardy and the gent called Mike hurried toward a rear door which bore the sign of "Private." While outside in the night, thick-skinned drums throbbed as the devil dancers, hideous in their war-paint and feathers, chanted a warning of trouble to their people, the Apaches.

Chapter VI

"IRISH MIKE" Dennis, agent of the reservation, was a man past fifty, loved and respected by the Indians because he understood them and dealt with them fairly. A son of the frontier himself, he had seen plenty hell on the range. His bullet-scarred body was mute testimony of that. A hard man in a way, yet kindly. A man who loved life—and justice.

Now in the rear office of the Agency building, he looked into Tim Hardy's blue eyes and read trouble. Hardy's dark suit was gray with trail dust. His fact was grim-lined.

"Shoot, Tim. Let's hear it."

Tim Hardy talked fast, his words blending with the muted throb of the Indian drums out there in the night. He told Mike Dennis everything that had happened that night. Told of Deputy Duke Grant forging a note to John Crow, signing Madge Layton's name, telling the Indian he could have half a dozen of the Lazy-L beef to butcher for the ceremony. Then how, when Crow went to haze those cows to the reservation, Sheriff Belden and Grant had suddenly come up on him and arrested him for rustling.

Hardy related what he had heard at the Lazy-L ranch house—the plan between Madge Layton, Grant and Belden to get rid of John Crow so she could buy Crow's spread cheap, which she had wanted because of the water. Doing that, Belden, who was really behind all the rustling on the range, was to clear himself and make five thousand dollars on the deal besides.

"Now," Hardy concluded "Belden an' a little weasel-faced deputy are high-tailin' it over here to nail Crow. The'll take him back an' string him up unless we can stop them."

Hardy's words vibrated with hate. He wasn't thinking of himself. He had spared the name of Madge Layton as much as possible. He was thinking only of getting justice for John Crow—of saving Mary from tragedy.

Mike Dennis' eyes had lost their customary twinkle. His face was set, hard. No word of Hardy's had he missed. He was shrewd enough to sabe more than Hardy had told. He came to his feet, huge fists clenching at his sides.

"I got a plan, Mike," Hardy muttered. "I—"

"Shore, an' I'm ridin' double with yuh, Tim." Mike Dennis grinned. But his eyes blazed. "I'm two jumps ahead of yuh. I didn't ride the range with yore pap for thirty years without learnin' how to read a Hardy mind. We cleaned up this range a couple of times. Reckon yuh an' me can turn this little trick. Tonight is the big celebration." Dennis' eyes began twinkling. "Mebby those Indians out there could get out of control. You followin' me, Tim?"

Tim Hardy was on his feet. "Right with yuh, Mike!" he almost yelled. "Belden has got to talk!"

"He'll talk, Tim!" Dennis snapped. "Mebby officials in Washington might not okay such a scheme but we ain't got time to talk it over with those stiff-collared gents back there. Hurry Tim—before Belden gets here!"

Mike Dennis almost ran out of the office door into the reception room of the Agency building. Tim Hardy was right at his heels. Near the outside door Mary Crow and her father were still standing, talking in whispers.

"Don't tell them, Tim," Mike Dennis called. "You three wait right here. I'll be back pronto."

Hardy grinned, watched Mike Dennis rush out into the night. Then he looked at Mary Crow as she came toward him. Puzzlement over-shadowed the worry in her eyes.

"Tim, I don't understand," she said anxiously.

"Just hold tight, Pigtails," Hardy said grimly "You too, John. Sabe?"

"Me sabe," John Crow grunted stolidly.

Nothing more was said for a long time. Like a bronzed statue, John Crow stood at the far end of the room near the door. In front of the large stone fire-place stood Tim Hardy with Mary Crow beside him. They looked at one another and listened to the throbbing drums. The bracketed oil lamps in the room sputtered in the silence. The mesquite roots in the fire-place made little crackling sounds as the flames consumed them. A clock on the mantel tickled, then struck the hour of twelve, and kept ticking. While outside, around those roaring campfires, the eerie chants of the devil dancers grew louder.

"Something is wrong out there," Mary Crow whispered in the hush.

Hardy nodded, but said nothing. By the door, John Crow seemed to be listening tensely, like a hunted deer sensing trouble. Something was happening out there among those Indians. Something that even Tim Hardy didn't quite understand. Strange things sometimes happen on a reservation. Indians are a strange race.

THEN HARDY caught the flutter of hoof-beats outside. Mary Crow and her father drew tense, listening. But neither of them moved. Hardy looked doorward as two horsemen roared up at the steps of the building. He knew who it was even before the door burst open.

Sheriff Belden stomped into the room like a rampaging bull. At his heels, eyes almost popping out of his sallow face, trailed Weasel-Face. Belden's eyes darted over the room. Finally when his gaze settled on Hardy, a smirking grin furled his lips.

"Well," he rumbled mockingly. "Two birds with one stone."

He took two ponderous steps out into the center of the room. He looked like a giant standing there with his hands hovering over the butts of his two pearl-handled six-guns.

"You an' this damned Indian comin' peaceful, Hardy?" he snarled. "Or yuh want to argue?"

Hardy shrugged, eyes never leaving the lawman's red, thick-jowled face. Mary Crow seemed to slump, a hopelessness coming into her eyes. But John Crow's face was still inscrutable. He just stared at the other two men.

"We'll go, Belden," Hardy said softly. "But yuh better get permission from the agent, hadn't yuh, Belden? He's a lawman too, you know."

Belden's face darkened with fury. "To hell with yore book law now, Hardy!" he blustered loudly. "Crow is wanted for rustlin'. You helped him escape jail. You got a charge or two agin you now!" His right hand drove down for the gun-snatch. Behind him Weasel made a hissing sound of terror.

Hardy didn't move. He seemed to forget his own gun. He just grinned, cold as death. His slitted eyes darted over the big sheriff's powerful shoulders. Belden caught the significance of that glance. He whirled, cursing, the gun in his hand leveling.

Just inside the closed door stood Mike Dennis, the agent. Belden had

been talking so loud he hadn't heard Dennis enter the room. Neither had Weasel-Face. But Hardy had seen him. And so had Mary Crow and her father. Now Mike Dennis paced quickly out into the room and stopped, his face strangely set and grim.

"Something wrong, Sheriff?" he asked mildly.

"Wrong?" Belden roared.

"Shore, I got a right to ask, ain't I?" smiled Dennis.

Belden fumed and roared. He was the sheriff of this county he'd have Mike Dennis understand. Tim Hardy and John Crow were his prisoners. It was damned poor business for a reservation agent to shelter prisoners.

"An' now, Dennis, the best thing yuh can do—"

"I see, Sheriff," Dennis interrupted quietly. "I see. But how you goin' to take them back, Sheriff?"

Belden looked as if he thought Mike Dennis had suddenly gone out of his mind. "Why ride, of course!" he bellowed. "Their horses is o u t there. I rode in, didn't I?"

"Why, shore now, you rode in, Sheriff."

Belden couldn't understand the strangeness of Mike Dennis. He must have thought the agent was stalling. Belden's huge body quivered with pent-up rage.

He roared: "What the hell's the matter with you, Dennis? You gone loco?"

Mike Dennis was shaking his head. "Nope," he said softly. "You an' yore weasel-faced pard ain't ridin' out of here tonight, that's all. You hear them drums beatin' out there? Hear them Indians jabberin'? They's hundreds of them Belden. They know what you've done an' t h e y want you. Shore, they let yuh ride in here. But you just try to ride out! Nothin' I can do will stop 'em, Belden. They're goin' to kill you before dawn. . . ."

Chapter VII

FOR a full moment, Sheriff Belden stood like a stricken person. His beefy face paled. Weasel-Face made a whimpering sound as Dennis' words seeped meaning into his brain. His bulging eyes darted over the room, and one bony hand lifted to his cheek.

Then Belden seemed to come to his senses. "Damn yuh, Dennis!" he raged thickly. "You an' Hardy—"

He leaped forward the gun in his hand lifted. When neither Hardy nor the agent moved Belden seemed to change his mind about striking them with the barrel of his gun.

"Hear them, Belden?" asked Dennis.

"Listen," suggested Hardy.

Belden listened then, and the only sound that came from him was his rasping breathing. The rhythmical drum-beats had increased to a muffled sound that was like distant thunder. And high above that sound struck the muttering, gibberish talk of the angry Apaches.

"They'll kill us . . . They'll kill us," came Weasel-Face's terrified whisper.

Belden's head jerked about on his huge shoulders. "Shut up, yuh little rat!" he screamed hoarsely.

Belden drew himself up then, fighting for a courage that wasn't in him. He couldn't conceal the fear in his eyes when he turned to Dennis.

"Listen here, Dennis!" he blustered. "Them Indians can't touch me! Hell, I'm the law in this here county! Them damned renegades can't git away with this stuff! The days for them goin' on the war-path an' killin' people is past! I'll—"

"I think yo're wrong, Belden," Dennis muttered tightly. "I think

yo're wrong. Indians never change."

Hardy lifted one hand, pointed. "Look toward the windows," Belden!"

Belden forgot his gun. He whirled, a startled, fearful curse escaping him. For just outside those dark windows were faces, and eyes, watching him. Indians—hideous in their war-paint. And all the time their jabbering and pounding drums filling the night. At every window were those faces. The building was surrounded!

Weasel-Face screamed, his eyes rolling in their sockets. Belden spun back to Dennis, the gun in his hand trembling.

"I'll kill 'em, Dennis!" he yelled. "Yet 'em try to lay a hand on me an' I'll kill 'em!"

"You might kill one of them, Belden," Dennis rapped. "But the others'll get yuh. They're goin' to nail yore hide to a post an' all hell can't stop them! They're goin' to torture yuh—burn yuh—then—"

"Stop it!" Belden shrieked.

He ran back and forth the length of the room as if seeking a place to hide. And at his heels ran Weasel-Face, his whimpering cries lost in the other sounds.

"They can't do this to me," Belden kept saying. "They can't. . . ."

But all the time he seemed to know they could. And it did things to Sheriff Belden, who had boasted he was afraid of no man. He wasn't the blustering, swaggering sheriff now. Terror gnawed at his vitals.

"They can't—"

"They will!" rapped Hardy.

Now those Indians were pounding on the front door, their lusty cries coming into the room. Dennis turned from the sheriff to Hardy.

"There's nothin' I can do now, Tim," he fired grimly.

Belden heard him. He saw Hardy and the agent draw their guns and face the door, and he heard Dennis say:

"Doin' this will only stop the first rush."

Belden broke then. He ran up to Hardy, clutched the young lawyer's shoulders.

"You got them damned Indians on the warpath, Hardy!" he screamed accusingly. "You turned 'em agin me! You've always had it in for me. Now yo're goin' to let 'em kill me just to save Crow's hide. Hardy! I'm a white man! Listen—"

"Quit squealin', Belden!" Hardy rapped harshly.

"Hardy!" Belden shrilled hysterically.

"Yo're a yella snake—a crooked—"

"You can stop 'em Hardy! They'll lisen to you! Do something!"

GUN in hand, Hardy still kept his eyes on the door. The bedlam outside had grown louder; the beating fists on the door threatened to smash it in.

"You've been doin' the rustlin' in the valley, Belden. You framed John Crow to clear yoreself. Now yuh got to answer to them, Belden."

"Yes! Yes!" Belden sobbed. His huge body seemed to shrivel. "I know it, Hardy. I admit it. Just don't let them git me. I don't want to die. They'll torture me—burn me! I'll talk an' I'll tell everythin' if you'll save me!"

"Start talkin', Belden! Hardy gritted above the din.

"You'll save me, Hardy?"

"Talk!"

And Belden talked. Sobbing, wheedling for mercy, he confessed to the part he had played in the framing of John Crow. He cried out the same story Tim Hardy had told Mike Dennis only a few minutes be-

fore in the back office. Then he begged Hardy to save him, to let him answer to the white man's law. Fear had broken Belden. It had changed him from a man into a cringing, whimpering beast in just a few short seconds.

"Just save me, Hardy . . . Save—me—"

He was still blubbering when Dennis stepped up to him. The agent took a pair of handcuffs from his belt. He snapped them around Belden's wrists, removed the pearl-handled guns from their holsters before the sheriff knew what was all about.

"That's all we wanted to know, Sheriff," he muttered. "Enough witnesses heard it."

Weasel-Face stood like a man in a trance while handcuffs were applied to him and his guns removed from his scrawny hips. Then Mike Dennis strode quickly to the front door. He jerked it open. There on the steps were jammed a dozen Apaches, paint streaking their faces. Dennis spoke a few words to them in their native tongue. He closed the door and their lusty yells ceased. Only the distant throw of the drums filtered into the room that had suddenly become quiet.

As Dennis came back to the center of the room, Belden watched him. Terror drained from the sheriff's ashen face. A glimmer of suspicion crept into his eyes.

"What'd yuh tell them, Dennis?" he husked.

"I just told them to go back to their dancin', Belden. We're through with them now."

Belden's lower jaw sagged. He looked from Dennis to Hardy, and then to Mary Crow and John. Finally his eyes strayed to Hardy.

"Then they wasn't—?" he begun dully.

Hardy shook his head. "No, Belden," he said soberly. "They weren't on the warpath. It was just a plan of ours. We figured it was the only way of gettin' the truth out of you."

A change came over Belden. The hate flame leaped into his sneaking eyes. Hate for Hardy and Dennis who had outwitted him, who'd made him confess to a deed that meant the gallows. Desperation shone in his eyes. Slowly he moved toward Hardy. One step, and then another. Mary Crow looked as if she wanted to scream, but no sound came.

"That's all right, Hardy," Belden said slowly. His spurs made a jangling sound, and Hardy watched out of his squinted eyes. "That's all right," he said resignedly. "Guess you win—"

He moved then. With the speed of a puma he leaped, both his manacled hands tearing Hardy's gun from its holster. And Hardy leaped back—too late! Dennis swore.

"Got yuh now!" Belden yelled exultantly. "Got yuh all. One funny move an' I'll plug yuh! Leave the gun alone, Dennis!"

And mentally cursing his own negligence, Hardy stood stiffly, watched Belden clutch Mary Crow up in front of him. There was no fear in the girl's eyes. Only hopeless despair.

"Tim!" she sobbed. "Tim!"

Belden was grinning, backing to the door, his gun swaying over John Crow, Hardy and Mike Dennis. Twisting sideways, still forcing the girl to stand in front of him, Belden flung open the door. Then he had her and was outside backing through the darkness toward the horses.

"Hang Weasel-Face if yuh want to, Hardy!" he yelled back tauntingly. "But me'n the squaw-gal is leavin', and if yuh shoot yuh'll hit her!"

A wild laugh came from him. It

beat into the seething turmoil of Hardy's mind like knife stabs. He heard Mary scream to him from out there in the darkness. Then he ran to the open doorway, the other men at his heels.

"You'll hit her if yuh shoot, Hardy!" Belden shouted.

Desperately, Hardy snatched the half drawn gun from Dennis' hand. Sweat beaded Hardy's tanned face.

Dennis croaked, "My God, Tim! You'll hit her! Don't shoot!"

AND Hardy prayed. He saw only the vague outline of the two people out there, Belden holding the Indian girl in front of him as a shield, moving back to one of the horses. In a moment they'd be gone. Belden would leap into the saddle, grab up the girl. Hardy's gun lifted. Over Mary Crow's shoulder he glimpsed the vague outline of Belden's head.

"Tim!" Dennis cried. "It's too long a shot!"

Teeth gritted, Hardy fired. Through the gunsmoke he saw Mary Crow drop to the ground. Seeing her fall seemed to do something to Hardy's sanity. A steely hand tore at his heart. Ignoring the shouts of the other men, he ran out into the night as Belden leaped astride one of the horses and roared away.

Hardy didn't look at Mary Crow as he hit the back of the second horse. Blinded with anguish and remorse, he rode like a madman after Belden. The night wind whipped his cheeks, but it didn't cool the fever in his eyes.

"I killed her," he groaned. "Killed the only girl I ever really—loved. . ."

Strange him saying that. Then he saw the blurry shape of Belden just ahead of him in the darkness. The sheriff was lashing his horse to the limit. His gun flamed, and Hardy laughed as a bullet whined close to his head.

"Belden!" he yelled huskily, triggering a shot.

Belden's horse stumbled. The big lawman was pitching to the ground, rolling. Hardy jerked his horse to a stop. He hit the ground running, just as Belden came to his feet, firing.

Hardy flipped the hammer of his gun. And instinctively he knew he was shooting straight. Through clenched teeth he kept striding forward, even though a slug cut through the flesh of his right shoulder. Then through the smoke-fog he saw Belden's knees buckle.

Slowly, tiredly, Hardy moved up to the sprawled body. He saw Belden was dead. Somehow it didn't matter to Hardy now—killing Belden. He kept thinking of Mary Crow. He kept thinking of the way she had fallen when he had been such a fool as to shoot.

Catching up the reins of his horse, he mounted and rode back toward the Agency building. A streamer of yellow light was coming through the open doorway. Evidently they had carried Mary inside. Hardy didn't look toward the burning camp-fires off to his right, where the painted figures still danced.

Mike Dennis was in the doorway when Hardy reined in.

"She's all right, Tim!" he called.

"All right?" Hardy yelled.

Before he got inside the building he heard Dennis tell him that Mary Crow had jerked from Belden's grasp when Hardy had fired. She had fallen to the ground, to make Belden think she was hit!

"Didn't even scratch her!" Dennis whooped. "But Belden?"

"Dead!" Hardy snapped indifferently.

He was inside now. He saw Mary—unhurt—standing near John Crow, smiling. But there were tears in Mary's eyes. Tears and a look that told Hardy more than words ever could.

He moved toward her. She came to meet him. They stopped a few feet apart. Then he laughed a little unsteadily. She gave a choked cry and rushed to him. It was just as natural that he took her in his arms as it was for the rains to come to the valley in the fall.

"Mary!" he whispered to her.

And she looked as if she wanted to tell him a lot of things but the words wouldn't come. And Tim Hardy forgot the presence of John Crow and Mike Dennis who were watching them. It didn't matter to him that Weasel-Face was a prisoner in a back room. Right now Hardy forgot everything except that Mary was in his arms, that he was holding close. She was sobbing and laughing, as a girl sometimes will.

A surge of joy, of new-found happiness swept over Hardy in that brief moment. Then the hopelessness of it all struck him with the jar of a forty-five slug. Bitterly, he suddenly recalled that Mary was, after all, an—Indian girl. He was a white man. And that damning realization made him drop his hands, look away from the imploring eyes of this pretty girl.

"Don't Pigtails," he murmured shakily. "I—"

He tried to laugh a little then. He told her he was glad it was all over, and he tried to tell himself that he was treating Mary like a little girl, or like a sister. And yet he knew he wasn't. He couldn't stand looking at the hurt look in her eyes.

"I'd—I'd better be going now," he finished lamely.

"Where, Tim?" she asked tremulously.

He moved slowly toward the door. He looked back at Mary who was just standing there in the center of the room. He glanced beyond her at Dennis and John Crow.

"Better send one of the men out on the trail for Belden," he said queerly.

"I'll do that, Tim," said Dennis. "I'll take care of that."

AND still Hardy didn't move. "You see I guess I'll be packin' up my law books tomorrow an' headin' back for Texas."

Giving a little sob, Mary ran out the door past him. The drum of horse's hoofs faded in the night. Hardy turned his back to the other two men; he kept looking off into the night in the direction Mary had taken. He heard John Crow talking to Dennis in his native tongue. He supposed John was telling the agent something about tonight's happenings. But he wasn't. John Crow was revealing a secret he had carried with him for eighteen years. A secret which had to do with Mary.

When the Indian had finished, Dennis turned quickly to Hardy, eyes shining with excitement.

"Jumpin' horned toads, Tim!" he blurted. "Mary is a white girl! John just now confessed. Her father was a missionary over in the Mogollons—died. It's on record in Silver City. He left his baby girl with John to raise an' it looks like he done a damn good job of it, too! Don't stand there starin', son! Go get Mary an' tell her! She's cryin' her heart out. . ."

The meaning of Dennis' words beat into Hardy's whirling brain. What else Mike Dennis was saying could wait. Mary Crow wasn't

really John Crow's daughter then! She was the daughter of a white man!

There was a warm light of affection in John Crow's eyes, the slightest hint of a smile upon his lips.

"Eet ees so, Teem," he murmured, nodding. "I keep heem a secret. Mary, she love you. . . ."

Tim Hardy was already out the front door, forking his horse. He rode out of the valley as hard and fast as his horse could carry him. The Indians, still hovering about their campfires waiting for the dawn, saw him disappear in the gloom, and they stared in wonder.

Hardy overtook Mary about a mile this side of her ranch house. What all they talked about then nobody ever did know. To Tim Hardy it was the happiest moment of his life. And a week later he did pull out for Texas with his law books and—Mary Crow, whose real name the records revealed was Mary Duncan. But whatever her name used to be didn't matter to Tim Hardy now, for she had changed it again.

This time to Mrs Tim Hardy.

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It was Youner's presence in the saloon that precipitated the battle.

RANGE WAR!

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

The range-hog and his renegade gang run into a hornet's nest of six-gun bullets when they encounter the courage of cattleman.

CLEM YATES, mending harness at the bench beside the barn, suddenly looked up when he caught the sound of galloping hoofs on the road in front. Ordinarily a quick glance would have satisfied him, for Ben Abbot was ever a hard rider, but this time there was something about the way his reckless partner sat his horse that called for a second look. A moment later Ben whirled the animal through the open gate in a cloud of dust, then dashed up to his partner and swung to the ground.

"Thar's a band of sheep over Jackpine River!" he shouted.

"The hell you say!" exploded Clem. "Where at, and who's bustin' the agreement?"

"They're at Alfalfa Flats. I was over thar lookin' for that bunch of yearlin's that got away. I come—"

"Who busted the stockmen's agreement?" Clem interrupted. "Omaha Jake?"

"No, it wasn't Omaha. Yank Lee says it's a new feller. A plumb stranger around here. I run onto Yank comin' home. He says the band crossed the deadline two-three days back, and they've been workin' down this way ever since. About two thousand head, and Mex herders! Damn hard-lookin' hombres, too, Yank says."

"Does Yank know this new chap's name?"

"Yeah! Youner. He's from Texas, Yank says, and a fightin' guy clear thru!"

"That's a heap worse than just plain bad news, Ben," said Clem gravely. "I knew about this guy, when I was a kid down thar. Everybody along the Rio knows about Seth Youner. He's a sheepman and a range hog, and them Mex herders just about settles it. He's an all around bad actor, and we're in for real hard times, Ben, shore as shootin'!"

"I reckon we are," returned Ben. "Ranchin's just one damn thing after another! Ain't it the truth? First it's rustlers, then it's blackleg, then it's dried-up range in summer and four foot of snow in the winter and kioteys at the calves, and now the cussed woollies drift in to clean up what's left of the range! I wish we'd just blowed in that reward money—instid of takin' old Carlton's bum advice and buyin' a ranch with it—damned if I don't!"

Clem Yates' face lighted with a smile. Ordinarily his pal was the most cheerful of companions; but Ben was afflicted with a pair of itching feet, and now, after a steady year and a half on their "new" ranch, with his safety valve screwed down, Ben was all but ready to explode.

Had Clem been older and wiser he might have sensed a certain danger in this condition of mind, but as it was he was merely amused. So he spread his long and slightly bowed legs a bit, and calmly rolled a smoke while he smiled down at his scowling friend.

"Cheer up, ol' hawse!" he said lightly. "We've still got the ranch, and the cattle—four hundred head of 'em—and thar's a few hundred bones left in the bank. Better put yore hawse up. We'll feed ourselves some supper, then we'll ride over to the Lazy Bar and see what John Kimball thinks about this sheep business."

"I don't reckon you're countin' on seein' Gerta, at all!" grinned Ben with friendly sarcasm.

"You'd better can that line of talk!" rejoined Clem shortly.

"All right," agreed Ben, "I was just a wonderin'. Anyhow, maybe we'll find old Carlton over thar. The paper said he was comin' some time this week."

"I hope so," returned Clem. "Looks like there is going to be a fight—a regular range war, maybe, and we'll shore need Carlton's advice. Even if he did give us a bum steer when we bought the ranch," he added, grinning down at his friend.

In speaking of "that reward," Ben Abbott had referred to an episode which was not exactly an unmixed credit to himself and Clem Yates. Briefly, these two young cowboys, finding themselves broke and out of a job at the beginning of winter, and smarting over the fact that they had been swindled out of their summer's wages, "borrowed" four good horses from the Lazy Bar and set out to rob a train. They had weakened, however, when they found the train stalled by a washout, and the passengers half-starved; and instead of pulling off the robbery, they ended by turning their own ample supply of

provisions over to the famished travelers.

Quite by chance old Carlton, president of the railroad and owner of the Lazy Bar, had been a passenger on this train, and was accompanied by his niece, Gerta Kimball, daughter of the ranch foreman, and Clem's sweetheart. Following a welcome supper from the donated provisions, Carlton had taken up a collection and was about to present the money to the boys, when, without the slightest warning, the notorious Lopez gang of outlaws sprang from the bushes, killed five men, robbed passengers and express car and disappeared into the night.

ON THEIR way home, the two boys lost their way in the mountains, and by sheer accident stumbled upon the outlaws' rendezvous. After some discussion they decided to attempt the capture of the bandits, and by taking them completely by surprise they managed to kill three of the six, including their leader, Ramon Lopez. Two of the others they captured, while only one got away.

Clem Yates had been wounded in the battle, but by heroic efforts they finally won back to First Hope City with the dead men and prisoners, and the loot taken from the train. Clem had recovered at the Lazy B Q, and when the eighteen thousand dollar reward was presently collected, the two young men had taken Carlton's advice and bought a small foothills ranch adjoining the big Lazy BQ. Which brings us back to the impending range war.

In a sense the Lazy BQ was a mere plaything for Carlton, but he took immense pride in it. It was his chief source of recreation and he was in no mind to be put out of business by sheep. Once before, a war of this sort had threatened, but after a dozen men had been killed, a compromise had been effected by the terms of which the sheep men agreed to keep to the east of a deadline and the cattle men to the west. Carlton had been the prime mover in bringing about the settlement, so quite naturally the cattlemen now looked to him to find the solution to the present problem.

Weeks before Ben Abbot discovered the sheep on Jackpine River, Carlton had known that trouble was pending, for information had come to him that two whole train loads of the Youner sheep had been unloaded at a certain siding on the east side. This section was already overstocked with sheep, and knowing Youner's reputation as a range hog, it seemed certain that the sheep king had his eye on the First Hope cattle range, and soon or late the issue would have to be met.

Carlton had therefore set a watch on the Youner sheep, with the result that within twenty-four hours of the time when the first band crossed the Deadline, messengers from the Lazy BQ were galloping in all directions to arouse the far-scattered cattle men and summon them to a meeting at the ranch.

By chance the couriers had missed Clem and his partner, so it was something of a surprise when they arrived at the ranch to find perhaps a hundred saddled horses grouped about the front gate. The two boys joined the grim-faced men gathered about the big front porch, and presently Carlton mounted the steps to make a brief speech.

HE HAD had two reliable men watching things for more than a month, he told the men, and he

now knew exactly the sort of man they had to deal with. Youner had gutted the range in his own section of Texas, and there was no questioning the fact that he had deliberately planned to invade the First Hope grazing country with at least eighty thousand sheep.

Already he had established a village at the base of the mountains on the other side of the Deadline, and had brought there over a hundred desperadoes, most of whom had belonged to bandit gangs below the border and had prices on their heads.

"And the worst of the matter is," he went on, "when it comes to the technically legal side of it, Youner has the law on his side. His plan is, of course, perfectly transparent. He has driven a single band on to your range, with the certainty that it will start a fight. He knows the sort of men you are, and he isn't fool enough to imagine that he could beat you in a fair fight.

"He has enough hard men to put up a desperate battle, however, and keep it up long enough to attract the attention of the entire state. Then he expects the Governor to take a hand and call out the militia, and following that, the whole question will have to be threshed out in court. And Youner expects to win there!

"Now men, I have, I think, as much respect for law as the next man, but I have also a lot of respect for the pioneers who fought the Indians off and dug this country out of the wilderness and made it a fit place for white men to live. Your homes are here, the range is the breath of life to you. Without it you would starve out in a year.

"And the sheep mean the end of the range for cattle, as you all know. You'll have to abandon your homes and sneak out of the country. And that means, with Youner running things, that this whole First Hope country will become a paradise for a lot of desperadoes. Make no mistake, men, you've either got to fight hard and soon and nip this thing in the bud, or run away with your tails between your legs and turn everything over to Youner and his renegades. That is all I have to say."

A cheer went up as Carlton stepped down. Other speakers followed and in the end an organization was whipped into shape and named The First Hope Cattleman's Association. It was agreed that open hostilities must be avoided if possible, and to that end Carlton was selected to interview Seth Youner at his headquarters in Baritan.

BARITAN lay on the east side of the Deadline, seventy-five miles by stage from First Hope and next day Carlton called on Youner at his office.

"You have no doubt guessed my mission here, Youner," Carlton suggested. Youner shook his head.

"You flatter me, Carlton," he said, flashing a canine smile. "I haven't the remotest idea what brings the president of a railroad to my humble office."

"I UNDERSTAND that a band of your sheep has crossed the Deadline and are now in the First Hope country," said Carlton, gravely.

"Quite likely," admitted Youner. "Why not?"

"You are no doubt aware," said Carlton, "that this is a violation of an agreement, entered into some six or seven years ago."

"I have heard of such an agreement," rejoined Youner, quietly, "but I never was a party to it, and my lawyer tells me that it has no legal standing whatsoever."

"Granted," said Carlton promptly. "But isn't there a moral side to the question? The cattlemen went through a lot of danger and hardships to establish their homes there. The sheep will ruin them. Do you expect them to lay down without a fight?"

"I am no such fool, Carlton," smiled the sheep king. "But fighting is the least of my worries, my friend. It is really my principal—well, recreation, so to speak."

"There is, then, no use to talk about the matter, I suppose?" said Carlton, rising slowly.

The sheep man leaped to his feet. "None whatever!" he said sharply. "There is no sentiment in business, Carlton, and I simply stand on my legal rights. And get this straight. The First Hope country is ninety-five per cent Government land. It is free grazing territory, open to any man—cattle, sheep or horses—if that man conforms to the law. It is the cattlemen that propose to make their own laws, and before I'm through with these cocky bullies and bluffers, they'll sing another tune! Start your music, brother, as soon as you like. Good day, Sir!"

Carlton eyed the other appraisingly for a moment, then made his way slowly out and down to the street. A compromise was wholly impossible, nothing could be more certain than that, and Carlton so reported next day to a crowd of men in the Silver Ring Saloon in First Hope. News of Carlton's arrival spread swiftly, and within the hour fully a hundred men gathered about the big front porch to discuss the situation.

Carlton had given them the gist of his talk with Youner when Yank Lee arrived to report that one band of sheep was still in Alfalfa Flats, but that no more had so far crossed the Deadline.

This was both good and bad news. It would be a simple matter to dispose of a single band of sheep, for the probability was that there were no guards other than the two Mexican herders. On the other hand it seemed to show that Youner was playing his cards shrewdly, that this one band was merely a bait, intended to force upon the cattlemen the responsibility for the first act of violence. There was no such thing as dodging the issue, however, so lots were presently drawn and twenty men selected to escort the sheep across the Deadline.

At sunrise next morning, heavily armed and provisioned for an extended trip, the party set out for Alfalfa Flats. Clem Yates, principally because of the part he had taken in the cleaning up of the Lopez gang, had been chosen captain of the company. The men were well mounted and made good time and shortly after noon they topped a hill and caught sight of the sheep. Circling the sheep on both sides they worked completely around them, but failed to find the slightest trace of the Mexicans. It seemed clear that the herders had been under orders to abandon the sheep, in case they were attacked, and equally clear that they had hastened away, taking their dogs with them. It was too late in the day to begin the drive over the mountains, so they decided to gather the sheep and camp for the night at the herders' tent.

WITHOUT dogs it was real work to gather the now far scattered band, but there were plenty of men and in the course of an hour the flock was bunched and driven onto the bed-grounds beside the creek. Then, to quote Clem Yates, "Hell

broke loose!" The sheep, sniffing and sneezing and bleating wildly, tore crazily about the flat and finally stampeded in every direction into the hills. The men looked on in helpless amazement, while they gathered slowly near the tent.

"What t' hell happened?" someone queried loudly.

"Pepper!" cried Clem. "Red pepper! Pounds of it, scattered everywhere on the bed-grounds! Them herders done it."

"Pepper their own sheep? You're full of hop, man!"

"Maybe so," rejoined Clem, "but listen. Them woollies will never stop runnin' as long as that pepper burns their snoots, and by mawnin' some of 'em will be ten miles from here. It will take a dozen men a week to bunch 'em again, and there'll be maybe half that nobody will ever see again.

"And then, how do we stand? We come here to run the sheep out of the country, everybody knows that. Youner will lay the pepper racket onto us, swear that we red-peppered the bed-grounds, and we can't prove we didn't do it. Pretty slick, I'd call it! He puts us in bad, right at the start, and that gives him an excuse to strike back. And that's exactly what he's been playin' for, all the time. There'll be blood on the moon, men, before this thing is settled!"

THE Silver King Saloon in First Hope had been for many years the unofficial headquarters of the cattlemen in the First Hope range country, and stakes often ran high.

Here, on the second night following the scattering of the Youner sheep, cattlemen from fifty miles around gathered to drink and gamble and damn the ways of the hated woollies and their owners. The night was hot, doors and windows were wide open, play at the tables was running high, as it always does in times of excitement.

There was dynamite in the air, too, for at the end of the bar next the front door, stood Youner himself, drinking heavily and swapping banter with the gang—the kind of banter that always preceded a fight in the old-time cattle country. As yet there was no sign of hostilities apparent, but the man's very presence at such a time was a challenge and a measure of the Youner nerve which was well known to all.

The sheep king w as a man to command a second look in any crowd in any country. Nearing fifty, tall and straight as a ramrod with a blue joweled jaw, constantly clamping a cigar; the polished ivory stocks of two forty-fives swinging at his hips —everything branded him as a man to be let severely alone, unless you were looking for trouble and didn't care how hard or soon it came.

In the beginning Youner pretended to make a joke of the scattering of his sheep, but minute by minute the banter grew more pointed and menacing, and the crowd massed in front of the bar as the gaming tables were deserted. It was a question of one insulting remark and the ball would be on.

LONG experience had taught Art Hammer, shrewd owner of the Silver King, that the best way to handle a hostile situation was to put out the lights before the fight began. He therefore watched closely from his post beside the big ice box at the far end of the bar, and when at last the lie was passed, he pulled his string and the lights went out. With his mind on the till, he had waited a thought too long, however.

Came the spiteful snapping of six-shooters, with spurts of fire flashing

in the darkness. Pandemonium broke with a blast of profanity and the hurried clatter of heavy boots on the floor. In a way, the advantage all lay with Youner, for the lone fighter may shoot with confidence into the dark, while the crowd must be mindful of friends in the line of fire.

For this reason, men who would have stayed to fight it out unflinchingly in the light, ran through doorways, rushed to the shelter of the big ice box, leaped head-first through the windows, anything to get away from a danger they could not locate in the gloom.

Almost in a breath, it seemed, the big room was clear, and silent save for the muttered complaints of wounded men. Presently Hammer and his night bar-tender rose cautiously from behind the bar and got a couple of lights going, as the men came straggling back into the room. A brief examination showed that three of the five men on the floor were dead, the others badly wounded.

NOBODY could understand why the sheep king should have pulled off such a stunt, unless from the sheer joy of a fight. The thing seemed without point or sense, but in the end one thing appeared clear enough: Youner had known about Hammer's habit of turning the lights off to forestall a fight, and had laid his plans accordingly.

He had dropped to fire from the floor the instant the lights went out, and no doubt had escaped without a scratch. At any rate they had had more than a taste of Seth Youner's metal, and nothing could now be more certain than that the range war was just beginning. Blood had been spilled, the blood of cattlemen, the fight would be to a finish, with no quarter asked or given.

When the lights came on, Clem Yates joined the crowd near the bar, and helped carry the wounded men around to the hotel. This matter attended to, he had time to remember that he hadn't seen Ben Abbot since long before the fight. He felt morally certain that his partner had not been present during the battle, so he was more peeved than alarmed, for it was growing late and high time to be starting for home. So he set out to make the rounds of the other resorts, shaping a pointed lecture for his irresponsible partner when he found him.

But there was no Ben, nor could he find anyone who had seen his fat pal since early in the evening. Still he was not really alarmed, and, as the stock must be looked after shortly before daylight he mounted his horse and set out for the ranch, twenty miles away.

Arriving sometime after sunrise, he stabled his mount and attended to his morning work, ate a scanty breakfast and stretched out on the lounge to catch up with his allowance of sleep. Rising in mid-afternoon he knocked together a bit of lunch, and attacked the neglected wood-pile. Expecting Ben to show up at any minute, he became thoroughly frightened when night came on and he failed to arrive.

Somehow, he could think of no earthly reason why, but somehow Seth Youner's face kept coming before him. An image of everything about the man—his cat-like eyes, his crooked smile, the polished stocks of his six-shooters, even his spurs, seemed burned into his mind like the brand on a steer.

At last he sprang to his feet, ran to the barn to saddle and mount his best horse, and at half past ten stepped into the Silver King. But nobody had seen Ben Abbot. Hammer

suggested that Ben had simply gone on a spree, but Clem answered that this was extremely doubtful, for when Ben took to his cups he invariably left a trail that a deaf-and-dumb man could follow blindfolded.

IN COMPANY with the Town Marshal he spent half the night searching the town, only to have to give up at last and turn the matter over to the marshal. Returning once more to the ranch he put in two miserable days without tidings from his friend. On the third morning he could stand it no longer, so he roped a horse with intent to ride to First Hope at once.

Clem led the animal into the barn and had just thrown the saddle on his back when he caught the clatter of hoofs in the road. He glanced through the door, and a wide smile lighted his lean face. Then suddenly he sobered. His partner was riding a strange horse. Ben rode up and dismounted without a word. Something had gone radically wrong, there was no doubt about that.

"Well, Clem," he blurted out, "I reckon I done spilled the beans at last. I done one hell of a trick, and I've come to own up as near like a man as a rotten cur can do it. I sold my half of the ranch!"

Clem, speechless, could only stare at his friend.

"It's the truth, Clem," Ben went on, scarcely above a whisper, "and I haven't told you the worst of it. I sold to Seth Youner!"

"To Youner? Good God, man!"

"Yes, I cain't hardly see yet how it happened, but I done it. There ain't any doubt about it, because I went to the records this mawnin' and read it myse'f."

Clem settled back on the manger to slowly roll and light a cigarette. Ben stared at the ground, silently scraping his boot in the dirt.

"How did it happen?" Clem inquired at last.

"I cain't tell you all of it," replied Ben, "because I don't know. But as near as I can remember, it was like this: A feller I didn't know come into the Silver King that night and told me Jack Knapp wanted to see me down to the Longhorn Saloon. He didn't know what Jack wanted, but I was just sucker enough to trail around thar to find out. Jack showed a fat roll and set up the drinks, then he said he wanted to buy the ranch. I thought he must be joshin', but he told me his aunt had died back East and left him a lot of coin, and judgin' by the bundle he had on him I begun to think he meant business.

"Well, we had four-five drinks pretty quick, then we walked around outside and talked about the deal, and after while we had a pull out of Jack's bottle. And Jack's hootch must of been doped, I reckon, because I didn't rightly come to myse'f no more till I waked up in a strange room. I got up and slung my clothes on and went down to the street, and you can guess how I felt when I found out I was over in Baritan!"

"The devil, you say!" Clem exploded. "Have you any idee how you got there?"

"Not much. I went with Jack and another feller in some kind of a rig, and Jack had a bottle along. That's all I'm sure about. Anyhow, we had a couple of drinks, and then I begun to remember things a little. I'd been to a lawyer's office with Jack and the other feller, and I signed some kind of papers. Then they give me a roll of money and I played faro to the ceilin' and set up drinks to a lot of fellers and raised hell in general. It was a kind of haze in my mind, but

I was sure of that much. Also I knew I was broke, because I frisked myse'f a-plenty and couldn't find a cent!"

"But you said you sold to Youner?" Clem reminded.

"I shore did, but I never found it out till Jack told me. Jack just made a kind of a joke out of the whole business, and finally told me that he was only workin' for Youner, which I'd of knowed right on the start if I'd had any sense. Jack 'lowed that Youner give him a hundred dollars and expenses to rope me into the thing. He said the paper I signed was a deed to Youner, so I looked up the records at the courthouse and found out he was right."

"How about the cattle?" Clem inquired gravely.

"The tail went with the hide," replied Ben, flushing to his ears. "Cattle and hawses and all. That's what the record said."

"YOU don't even know how much cash they give you, I reckon?"

"No idee—much. I looked around some, and from what the fellers told me I reckon I must had maybe a thousand dollars. The deed says ten thousand, but if they ever paid me that much, somebody stole it off of me. The big end of it, anyhow."

"Jack is a bigger thief than his boss," declared Clem. "Did the coyote come back with you, or is he workin' regular for Youner?"

"Jack's in the hospital over to Baritan," replied Ben grimly. "I beat up the skunk till you wouldn't know him! Then they throwed me in jail and old Carlton bailed me out. He lent me money enough to get home on, and I reckon that's about all I've got to say."

"It's a wonder you didn't shoot Jack," Clem suggested.

"I was too damn mad to shoot. I just bent my gun over his rotten head, then I stomped him into the ground till they pulled me off. They don't know for sure yet whether he'll get well or not. But Carlton's got a mighty pull over thar, so he got me out. For a while, anyhow!"

"Well," said Clem, "no use cryin' about spilt milk, and maybe everything will come out all right yet. What do you reckon Youner wants just a half interest in the ranch for? Of course, he's playin' for a place to use as headquarters over here, but why didn't he come out in the open and buy us both out, if the ranch suited him?"

"Would you of sold to him?" demanded Ben.

"Well, no," replied Clem slowly, "not to any range-hog to start a sheep ranch on."

"That's it, exactly!" rejoined Ben. "Youner knew dang well he couldn't buy a ranch anywhere in this country, and that's why he set Jack after me the way he did. Jack 'lowed that Youner wanted our place on account of the big spring. It's located just right for him, Jack said, and he knowed just as well as we do that there ain't no more water anywhere in five miles. Jack 'lowed that now Youner's got my half, he'll just freeze you out. That's what made me smear him!"

"I reckon he could it, all right," admitted Clem quietly. "A pore man's got mighty little chance when he bucks up against a man like Youner. But there's no use talking about that. What are you aimin' to do now?"

"Anything you say, Clem. I want to stay right here and do what I can to pull you out of this hole, and it won't cost you a cent but grub and smokes. I'm aimin' to be here when

this thing comes to head. Looks like there's going to be a bloody range war, and I'm aiming to have both hands into the pie, plumb to the elbow! I've quit being a damn-fool kid, Mister, and f'um now on the feller that plays me for one is going to find out something. I ain't just a-blowin', Clem, and all I ask for is a chance to prove it."

"All right," agreed Clem, quickly. "I don't know how much I can pay you, maybe nothing at all. Anyhow we'll just forget what's happened and see what we can do."

EARLY next morning Clem saddled a horse and set out for First Hope, leaving the ranch in charge of Ben. No possible good could come from his enforced partnership with Youner, and the sooner he got out of it the better, so he was on his way to see the man and make some sort of a deal. He'd have to take the worst of it, of course, but anything would be better than the present situation.

To his surprise the sheep king greeted him cordially, and smiled when he made a proposal to buy or sell.

"No," replied Youner, folding his arms and mouthing his cigar. "I don't want to buy, and I don't want to sell. I'll divide, split the ranch, however. Tell you what I'll do," he went on, reaching for a county map and poising his pencil. "You divide the ranch into two equal parts and I'll take my choice; or I'll divide it and you do the picking. What do you say?"

"All right," agreed Clem promptly, "you divide and I'll pick."

"Agreed," said Youner. Whereupon he outlined the twelve hundred acre ranch on the map, then drew a zigzag line, following the forty acre lines from top to bottom.

"There you are, young man," said Youner, pleasantly, "take your choice."

CLEM instantly noted that Youner's divisions left both the spring and the buildings on the west side of the line. This surprised him, for he believed all along that the sheep king was after the water more than anything else, and here the man was offering him not only the spring but the buildings too. There might be some trick in it, he reflected. Still, he knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, which forty the spring and buildings were on, so how could there be any trick about it?

"Come, young man," Youner presently exclaimed, "my time is valuable; take it or leave it."

"I'll take the west side," returned Clem, impulsively. "But how about the cattle? I'd like to divide them, too."

"No," said Youner crisply, "when it comes to the cattle I'd rather buy or sell. I'll give or take four thousand dollars."

Clem had come with the idea of selling his share to Youner if possible, but the price was low and the young man was tempted.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Clem finally, "if you'll take my check for two thousand and give me a year on the balance, I'll buy. That will just about clean up my bank account, but I'll take a shot at the thing anyhow."

"Very good," said Youner quickly. "And now we may as well hustle around to a notary's office and fix up the papers and get everything settled."

Two hours later Clem began his homeward journey in rather an optimistic frame of mind. But presently doubts began to arise. For one thing, the sheep man had been alto-

gether too easy to deal with. He was a crook, a beast without heart or feelings, and there simply must be something behind all this queer dealing with Ben Abbot and himself.

Too, he remembered now that some days back he had stumbled upon two men with a surveyor's tripod, evidently running a section line in the timber north of the ranch. They were on Government land, however, so he had thought nothing about it at the time, but now the incident disturbed him. In the end he resolved to lay the matter before County Surveyor Eric Leiber. It was night when he reached First Hope, so he took a room at the Hotel, and early next morning went to Leiber's office. After Clem had explained the situation, the official took down the numbers of the land and turned to his plats.

"This is what we call a correction line," explained Leiber, pointing to the north line of the ranch. "There's a chance for a bad mistake. Any cross fences on the ranch?"

"Yes," replied Clem, with his heart in his mouth, "there's a north and south fence that splits the place square in two in the middle."

"Who built that fence?"

"I DON'T know. The ranch was made up out of a lot of homesteads, and the fence was there when we got the place. But what is a correction line?"

"It's like this, Clem. Range lines are like meridians of longitude: They get closer together as you go north, so that in order to keep the sections to approximately 640 acres it is necessary to make a new start at regular intervals. And this means that along a correction line there is a double row of section corner mounds, with variable spaces between them. In your case the offset is 160 yards. But what particular difference would this make to you?"

"Just this!" replied Clem grimly. "If that line is moved 100 yards west, it leaves my buildings and the spring on Youner's land. And without them, particularly the spring, the ranch is hardly worth a song!"

"Youner undoubtedly knew what he was doing," said Leiber, with conviction. "So it seems like a clear case that whoever built that fence did his own surveying. He evidently found a mound near the spot where he supposed the corner to be, and jumped to the conclusion that there was no chance for a mistake. It's a common error with people who don't understand the business. I'm sorry, Clem, but I'm afraid that Youner has you up a tree."

"Thanks, Leiber, I reckon he has," said Clem rising to drag wearily out to the street. Thoroughly discouraged, Clem returned to his room and spent the next three hours in gloomy meditation. In the end he resolved to sell the stock and quit the ranching game, once for all, and try something else.

HAVING settled at last upon a course of action, Clem suddenly came to life, and within the half hour he was on his way back to the ranch. There was no sign of his pal about when he reached there, and the chores had not been done. A cold stove indicated that Ben had not been around for some time. Wondering a little, he built a fire and was reaching for the coffee pot, when he spied a sheet of paper tucked beneath it. It was a note from Ben, and read:

"Yank Lee was over last nite and says Youner's outfit is bunchin' them sheep. I aim to ride over this mawnin' and see what's going on. Back before dark, Ben."

Clem was more than a little worried. It would be just like his heedless friend to mix it with the renegade Greasers. There was also a strong probability that the Mexicans would shoot the waddy down from ambush if they got the slightest chance. He went to the door and looked out. A storm seemed brewing and the night was inky black, and a moment's reflection told him hunting for his friend under such conditions would be sheer folly. So there was nothing to do but wait. It was not until next afternoon that he caught sight of Ben coming over the hill north of the ranch.

As his pal came closer Clem observed that the horse was all but ready to drop from hard riding. Horse and rider were literally plastered with mud and foamy sweat, and it seemed certain that once more something serious had happened. Clem hurried out to the gate.

"The cattle's gone, Clem!" Ben blurted out.

Clem settled limply down on the horse-block and dazedly took off his hat. "I couldn't find a head of 'em!" Ben went on tensely. "But I found the trail and follered it plumb to Cholla Arroyo. Then it got dark and I couldn't do nothing more, so I turned around and come back. Them long-rider curs drove yore cattle clean over the mountains, Clem, shore as hell! And that ain't the worst of it. Yank Lee's wife and the kid was burned to death last night!"

Clem sprang to his feet: "Yank Lee's wife burned to death?" he gasped. "And young Yank? How did it happen?"

"Nobody knows — exactly. Yank was gone to First Hope. I come past there this mawnin' and found the buildin's in ashes. I rode on down to the Leslie place and found Bo Leslie there. He said that Saul got up to shut the window sometime in the night, and saw the house on fire. So him and Saul forked their hawses bareback and loped up thar. The roof fell in just as they got thar. They couldn't do a thing, of course, so they went back home.

"THEY knowed that Yank left the woman and the boy thar, so they went back at daylight this mawnin', and saw thàt all the buildin's was gone. It looked mighty bad, because the fire couldn't of spread to the barn without somebody spread it. There'd been ten or fifteen Greasers messing around the country for two-three days, so they looked around and Saul found a spangle off'n a Mex hat layin' under a tree in the yard, close to the house.

"That just about settled it. The rain had put the fire all out, so they poked around in the ruins and found —well, thar wasn't much left, but thar wasn't no room for doubt about the woman and young Yank. Bo said it was the awfulest thing he had ever seen!"

"Yank wasn't back when you was there?" inquired Clem.

"No, he don't know about it yet. I reckon hell's gonta pop right soon now!"

"Yes," agreed Clem grimly, "hell will shore pop right soon. The cowardly yellow low dogs! Burnin' pore folks out and fightin' women and children! That's the one shore sign of a rotten coward, Ben, and they've got to pay! Youner is at the bottom of it, and he's got to pay too."

"Yes," said Ben dully, "I reckon they've got to. How did you come out with Youner?"

"He just about cleaned me, bank roll and all," replied Clem shortly. "I'll tell you all about it later on.

We've got to get out of here. Not a mite of use to hunt the cattle, and there's nothing left but the hawses and farmin' tools. I'm aimin' to pack everything this evenin' and pull out for the Lazy BQ first thing in the mawnin'. I'm takin'—"

"Somebody comin'," Ben interrupted.

Clem glanced up and saw three riders topping the hill to the north. As they came close he noted that two of them were heavily armed Mexicans, the other a young white girl. The latter was dressed man fashion—cowboy hat, flannel shirt, open at the throat, chaps and high-topped boots, with a vicious looking six-shooter at her hip. Her face was high-colored and thin, her hair a deep red.

"Hello, Ben Abbot!" she exclaimed, brightly. "You didn't expect me over here quite so soon, I reckon?"

The girl swung lithely from her horse. Ben grinned prodigiously. "Well, no, Miss Anita, I didn't," he admitted. Ben and the girl, paying no attention to Clem and the Mexicans, chattered on until Clem gleaned that Ben had stumbled upon her camp at Jackpine River, and had taken dinner there the day before. It seemed, too, that they never had met before, and Clem began to sense a romance.

AT LAST Ben came to himself and introduced Clem to the girl in his own fashion: "Miss Youner," he smiled, "mitt my pal, Clem Yates."

The girl put out her hand as a man might have done. The name rather jarred Clem for a moment, but he liked the sturdy grip of her hand-clasp.

"Yes," said the girl, as she released Clem's hand, "I am Seth Youner's girl, all right, but don't let that worry you."

"Miss Anita and her old man don't hitch any too good," Ben explained. "She's onto his curves, believe me! But say, it's getting mighty near dinner time. Le's go in the house and feed ourselves. We've got spuds, Miss Anita, and some yearlin' beef and one-thing-another."

"Sure, I'll eat with you!" returned the girl quickly. "We have lunch along, so Pancho and Ramon can eat out here." Turning about, she spoke a few words in Spanish to her escort, then Clem led the way into the house.

"Bring on your spuds, men," she said briskly, rolling up her sleeves. "Just look as pleasant as you can and obey orders, and I'll have the hash on the table in no time."

"Things ain't none too clean around here," said Ben hesitatingly. "You better just set down and let Clem and me scour things up a little."

"Scour nothing!" exclaimed Anita. "I've batched a heap myself. Bring on your spuds and rustle that beef. Where's your coffee and your biscuit makin's? Here you, Clem, get busy and build a fire, and I'll show you some biscuits what is."

THUS the girl took command, driving Ben to the cellar to get the spuds and helping Clem with the fire. Then, chattering brightly, she peeled potatoes and mixed biscuits, made coffee and put the beef on to fry, and within the hour they sat down to what Ben called a "plumb nifty helpin' of hash."

"You wouldn't hardly take me for Seth Youner's daughter, would you?" the girl presently asked, smiling across at Clem.

"Well," Clem temporized, a bit em-

barrassed, "I don't know as I would. You are altogether—"

"Different!" Anita supplied. "I hope so, anyhow. Dad and me—"

"He locked her up for a solid month, last summer," Ben put in. "And all because she went to a dance without askin' him all about it first. And her twenty years old, mind you!"

"He sure did!" exclaimed the girl. "And I ran away this time, too. I'd heard a lot of talk, so I just came over here to see what's what for myself. Dad will be wild if he finds it out. He'll just about skin Pancho and Ramon alive!"

"Anyhow, I know how he treats his Mexicans, and that's enough! You wouldn't believe the way he beats 'em up when he gets mad. Especially Jose, his body-servant. I don't see why Jose stands for it. Just afraid for his life, I suppose. But the worst of it is, he says he ain't responsible for what the Mexicans do when they get drunk. Some terrible things happened down south when they got drunk, But Dad says he isn't to blame for it. I can't see it that way at all. Sometimes I get the idea that he isn't really my father, but—oh, I suppose he might have been different if my mother had lived, but she died when I was only a child."

The girl fell silent and Clem wondered if he ought to tell her about the Lee tragedy. Ben saved him the decision.

"Something terrible happened just last night, Miss Anita," he said.

"What was that?" the girl asked.

"The Lee house, over the hill about five miles, burned last night. Lee's wife and boy was burned to death. They found a Mexican hat spangle under a tree close to the house."

The girl went deathly white. "Oh!" she faltered, rising slowly with her hands over her eyes.

"I'm sorry I told you about it," Ben hastened to say. "It just sort of busted out, Miss Anita. Set down and finish yore dinner. We'll talk about something else."

"OH, I just couldn't!" exclaimed the girl, passionately. "I'm going right over there and see for myself."

"I'll go with you," Ben interrupted.

"No, no! I don't want you to go!" rejoined Anita as she whirled to pick up her hat. "It wouldn't be safe. I know something now, something I only suspected before. Just tell me how to get over there, that's all. And listen, you boys get out of here as quick as ever you can. Join your friends down in the valley, and watch your step! I may be able to stop things, but I'm afraid I'm too late."

Ben gave her the simple directions to the Lee place and she dashed through the door. Clem and Ben, staring dumbly, watched her mount and gallop away, with the two Mexicans following close behind.

"That girl is shore some rider!" exclaimed Ben, as the little party disappeared behind the hill.

"I wonder," said Clem, "just what she meant when she said she could maybe stop things. I reckon Youner is about ready for business, and the girl knows it. We've got to get our stuff out of here plumb pronto and join up with the bunch. Every he-man in the county will be in First Hope by tonight. Come on, let's get busy."

WORKING swiftly, they loaded their more valuable possessions into two big wagons, and set out for the Lazy BQ with their extra horses leading behind. Shortly before sundown they reached the place,

and found it deserted of everybody but the Chinese cook.

"Boy come heap fast on horse," the cook told them. "Horse heap wet. Jus' opteh dinneh he come. Ev'body jump on horse, ride like hell. Lotsa gun. Lotsa hurry-up-quick."

Thus in a dozen words cookie made everything clear enough, so they drove the wagons into the barn yard and turned the work stock in the corral, saddled their cayuses and galloped to First Hope. News of the burning of the Lee home and the death of the woman and child had thrown the town into an uproar. Everybody was in a fever of preparation for the expected battle with Youner and his army of renegades.

Old Carlton was directing things. He told Clem and Ben that a party of forty men in charge of Yank Lee was already on the way to the front, and expected to camp at the Leslie ranch. He hoped to have another party ready within the hour, he said, and needed Clem badly to help straighten out the tangle. A supply train of forty horses was being packed at the freight warehouse. Dr. Ohrsen was in charge there and Ben Abbot, much to his disgust, was ordered to proceed to that point and lend the doctor a hand with the tents and cots for an emergency hospital at the front.

With Clem Yates' help, Carlton presently got a party of forty-five men straightened out. Carlton took the lead, with Clem riding at his side. Toward morning they joined the other company at the Leslie ranch and settled themselves for a few hours' rest while they waited for the pack train.

At ten o'clock the train arrived, and after a quick meal Carlton called the leaders together to plan the day's operations. In the end six parties of ten men each were arranged and ordered to spread out fanwise to sweep a section of country at least five miles wide. They knew nothing of Youner's plans, had no means of knowing what lay ahead, so the keynote of the advance would be caution.

The remainder of the command, all picked men, Carlton sent ahead as scouts, with orders to keep well in advance of the main party. The country ahead was rocky and rough, and for the most part heavily timbered. A sturdy old log blockhouse, relic of Indian wars, stood on a rocky point near the mouth of Jackpine River canyon some ten miles ahead, and this would be the objective of the first day's drive.

HEADING a party of ten, Carlton and Clem spread them at shouting distance apart and advanced straight ahead. The others deployed right and left and the drive was on. Proceeding very slowly, in order to give the other parties time to reach their places in the line, they advanced cautiously.

Clem's thoughts presently turned to Anita Youner. He wondered where she was and what her cryptic remark had meant. Had she returned to the Mexican village beyond the mountains? Would she be able to "stop the thing"—whatever it was? He was on the point of speaking to Carlton about it when the sudden popping of rifle fire came from off the right. Carlton called a halt. They could hear distant shouting, more firing, then silence.

"Probably some of the boys ran into the sheep, with perhaps only a couple of herders along," Carlton suggested. "It doesn't seem to be anything serious, so we may as well push ahead till we hear something more." No more signs of trouble developed, and late in the afternoon

they arrived without mishap at the mouth of the canyon. One of the other squads was there ahead of them, and others came straggling in. Presently Yank Lee came to report that he had encountered a band of sheep with four Mexican herders in charge.

"The Greasers opened fire the minute they saw us," Lee explained. "There was heavy brush all around, so I reckon they only saw one or two of us at first, and thought they could clean us out easy enough. We got all of the devils and came through without a scratch."

"That explains the firing we heard this morning," said Carlton. "I'm glad it happened to be you that found them, Yank," he added, significantly. "It must have been some satisfaction to get a chance—"

"It was!" Lee interrupted, grimly.

A scout came in to report the blockhouse free of the enemy. And since Youner had not seen fit to make use of its obvious advantages, it seemed certain that he would make his stand farther back in the mountains, so after some discussion they decided to camp where they were. A little later the pack train arrived, supper was prepared and eaten, a tent was put some distance in the rear to serve as a hospital in case of sudden need. Then a heavy picket line was established and the main party gathered about a dozen campfires to rest.

Clem presently told Carlton of Anita Youner's visit at the ranch, relating what she had said and describing her hasty departure. Carlton, thoroughly surprised and somewhat mystified, wondered what exactly the girl had meant when she said she might be able to "stop the thing."

"I puzzled about that myse'f," replied Clem. "Nearest I could come to it she knowed something about Youner's plans, or thought she did, anyhow, and my notion is that the whole outfit is layin' for us somewhere in the brakes up around Challa Arroyo."

"No doubt of it," agreed Carlton quickly. "And it seems clear now that every move Youner has made—the pepper stunt with the sheep, the fight at the Silver King, the burning of the Lee home—everything was done with the idea of inflaming our crew to the point where we would not hesitate to attack him in his own stronghold. And such being the case—"

The sharp report of a rifle rang out near at hand, and a moment later a rider dashed into the far end of the camp-ground. In a breath every man in the camp was on his feet, rifle in hand. The rider had stopped in the shadow of some trees, but Clem and Carlton could make out the figures of the men gathered about the newcomer's horse. Then suddenly the group scattered, the rider came on to Carlton's fire and swung to the ground.

IT WAS Anita Youner, without her hat and fairly thatched with yellow mud. Her hair had fallen about her shoulders and had been tied once around with a string cut from a saddle thong. All color had left her face, her neck and right hand were smeared with fresh blood and she appeared on the point of complete collapse. The men sprang to assist her, but she waved them away.

"No," she said, sharply, "I'm not going to faint. Don't think it! I came to warn you. The Mexicans are coming at midnight. They had orders just to hold the Arroyo, but they're crazy with whiskey and completely out of hand. My father isn't with

them. The Mexicans expected him before noon today, but he did not come. They don't know why—it isn't at all like him—something must have happened at Baritan. I did what I could, but the men were wild with liquor and I could do nothing with them. They put a guard over me, but I managed to get away."

"You've been hurt!" exclaimed Ben, "how—what—who done it?"

"One of your pickets," replied Miss Anita, with a wan smile. "But don't blame the man, please, it was all my own fault. I thought your guards would have more sense than to fire at a lone rider, so I came on like the wind and paid no attention to his challenge. Don't worry; I'm not hurt much. Just a scratch on my neck is all.

"But you must get ready! The Mexicans will leave their horses a mile or so in the rear and attack on foot. They expect to find you in the blockhouse. That's about all I can tell you. They've been watching you all day with glasses, and they know about the herders you killed. So they're in deadly earnest, make no mistake about that! And watch your step, for most of them came from Mexican bandit gangs, and they've had all sorts of experience in this sort of fighting."

Carlton ordered Ben to escort the girl back to the hospital tent and make sure that the doctor was there to attend to her injury. "You are to stay there, too," he added crisply. "There'll be wounded men to care for, and the doctor will need help."

Ben led the weary girl away; Carlton called his leaders together for a hasty conference. The command was now divided into four parties. Saul Leslie with a squad of ten occupied the blockhouse. Clem Yates with twenty advanced to a steep hill beyond the blockhouse and concealed themselves among the rocks in the thick brush. Carlton and Yank Lee, with the rest of the command, occupied the brushy rising ground lying to the south.

Everything depended on surprise, so the one essential thing would be silence. Leslie had orders to keep a torch burning in the blockhouse, which would leave the Mexicans in no doubt as to its being occupied.

Clem Yates, from his place of concealment on the rocky point, presently saw Leslie's torch flare up in the blockhouse, and so knew that he was ready for the battle. The moon shone brightly, now well overhead. There was no wind, and the deathlike stillness seemed almost a tangible thing as they waited in tense silence for the enemy's arrival.

Presently the snapping of a dry stick near at hand startled them almost as a rifle shot might have done. Came other sounds, the click of a boot on stone, muttered exclamations in Spanish when a dislodged rock clattered down the hill. Finally shadowy figures came, slinking along below them as the enemy found their positions among the rocks and trees.

THEY waited an age, it seemed. Then suddenly the ground shook beneath them, and the night air crashed with the roar of a terrific explosion. The blockhouse seemed to leap in all directions into the sky, torn apart by the fury of the blast. The air was alive with flying timbers. A big log hurtled into a group of the enemy lying concealed below.

For a moment Clem looked down on the wild scene in stunned amazement, then suddenly came to his senses and shouted, "Fire!" The men responded on the instant. A blast from Carlton's side came like an

echo. Most of the enemy, carried on by the momentum of the attack, took refuge in what was left of the blockhouse. A few rushed to the shelter of the brush beyond. Still others, apparently completely bewildered, turned to charge back, firing as they ran.

The white men kept up a steady fire, the enemy answered from the mess of broken timbers that had been the blockhouse, ricocheting slugs whined viciously as they glanced from trees and rocks. Then fire broke out in the ruins, and presently a white handkerchief appeared, held aloft on a long splinter from a broken board. Clem ordered his men to stop firing, and a moment later Carlton's party fell silent.

SOME twenty-five or thirty Mexicans now rose from the ruins and threw their guns away as they advanced into the open. Clem led his men down from the hill, and Carlton's party quickly joined them about the group of prisoners. Wounded Mexicans lay all about, crying out their misery.

The leader spoke in very good English.

"I am Diego Ortega, at your service," he said, removing his hat and bowing to Clem Yates, whom he evidently mistook for the boss. "To be sure, Senor, you give us the so great surprise! What iss it the Senor's pleasure to do weeth my friends and me?"

"What do you expect to do, if we let you go?" interposed Carlton.

"Ver' soon, Senor," replied Ortega bowing to Carlton, "we go back to our own contree, if the Senor so kindly permit. The Senor Youner iss dead, and—"

"Youner dead?" exclaimed Carlton, completely taken aback; "where is—how do you know this?"

"A courier breeng me the message, only one — maybe two hour ago. Truly, Senor, me? I try to stop thees fight. I tell my comrades it iss no use to fight—the Senor Youner iss dead. They not believe me that the Senor iss dead. Also, the men were wild weeth the liquor, Senor. They know about the herders which you keel, and they are what you call crazy for the revenge. Truly, Senor, I could not stop them!"

"How did Youner meet his death?" inquired Carlton. "Are you sure of your information?"

"Ver' sure, Senor. There is no question. He iss what you call deesembowel weeth the stiletto, Senor. Jose Martinez, my contreemen, he iss the Senor Youner's servant, understand? He ees found beside the Senor Youner, lying on the floor, weeth two bullet een hees face and bloody knife een hees hand.

"Eet iss all ver' plain, Senor. Jose, he stab the Senor weeth the knife. The Senor shoot two times, then he fall down beside Jose. Eet iss all ver' plain. The Senor Younèr was sometime ver' cruel to my friend Jose!"

"You had the blockhouse mined, of course?" said Carlton, after a moment.

"Mined, Senor? I know not. But there was much powder! Eet was the Senor Youner's idea, Senor. He say perhaps you go een blockhouse. Eef not, he make the fight and drive you een. So ten day—maybe two week ago—much powder was buried below, weeth the leetle wire which ron back to the rocks behind. I know not how eet iss, Senor, but you push the lever, so, and—Caramba!—the house ees gone!"

"I don't understand why your men charged the ruined blockhouse," said Carlton, with a puzzled frown. "They must have known that no man could

live through such a blast as that."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ortega, spreading his hands, with a quick shrug. "Eet iss all ver' bad, perhaps, but eet iss easy explain, Senor. The Americano iss sometime have plentee money een hees pocket!"

"And dead men are plumb easy to rob!" said Clem, disgustedly.

"Ver' easy, Senor. But truly, gentlemen, we ask only time to bury our comrades; then we depart in peace. We are half of us keeled, the Senor Youner iss dead, there iss no one to pay! Surely you understand how eet iss?"

Carlton drew Clem aside: "There is good sense in the fellow's argument," he said tersely. "There isn't much danger of any more trouble, but we'll take no chances. You'd best pick ten good men and drive the prisoners up to the bluff, and hold them there till we've looked after our own casualties."

Some time before noon next day the prisoners finished their gruesome task and began their journey back over the Deadline, and Clem was free to return with his party to the camp. Most of the command had already departed for First Hope, but five or six remained, including Carlton, whom Clem found seated on a log beside the hospital tent. Their own dead and wounded had long since been taken care of, but as yet Clem knew nothing about the extent of the damage.

"Well," he said, with a glance at the tent, "How about it, Mr. Carlton?"

"Bad enough, Clem," replied Carlton gravely. "It might have been a lot worse, of course, but it's bad enough as it is. The explosion did nearly all the damage. Leslie and his men were blowed to pieces, of course. We found—some things—but the less said about it the better. Aside from that, no one was killed, and only five wounded. And only one seriously. He's in the tent there; the doctor was afraid to move him."

"WHERE is Miss Youner?" Clem inquired, seating himself beside Carlton.

"She heard about her father's death, so she left with the first party this morning. She aims to take the Stage from First Hope."

"Who was it got hurt so bad?" inquired Clem softly.

"It was—a friend of yours," Carlton temporized.

"Ben?" Clem husked, springing to his feet.

"Wait a minute!" admonished Carlton, clutching Clem's sleeve to pull him back down on the log. "You can't go in yet. The doctor is working with him now. Yank Lee is helping. Ben was shot through the right lung. He's in bad shape, but the doctor thinks he has a chance to pull through."

"I'm surprised at the Youner gal leaving him that way," said Clem, recovering his poise. "They seemed to be pretty good friends."

"She didn't know about it."

The doctor spoke softly beckoning from the tent opening. Carlton and Clem followed him into the tent. Ben Abbot lay on a cot in a far corner. His blood-soaked clothes still lay on a campchair beside the cot. Clem was shocked as he never had been before. Every vestige of his pal's usually high color had left his face, he seemed to have shrunk to half his usual size, and save the movement of a gentle breathing he might have passed for a dead man.

"I just gave him a shot," said the doctor, crisply, "and he'll probably sleep for five or six hours. It will be

touch and go, men, but I think now that he'll pull through."

"He's a good fella," said Clem, feelingly, as they stood looking down on his stricken pal. "And he shore made good on what he said, too!"

"How was that?" inquired Dr. Ohrsen.

"Well," replied Clem, with a quivering chin, "the pore fella was all broke up over the way he sold out to Youner; and he said he aimed to be in at the finish and have both hands into the pie, plumb to the elbow. And he shore done it!"

Next day Gerta Kimball came, and two days later Anita Youner arrived with a nurse from the Baritan hospital. As the doctor had forecast, it was "touch and go" for several anxious days, but presently Ben began to mend, and the time came when the doctor pronounced him out of danger.

At the end of the third week Ben was able to sit for a time in the sunshine beside the tent. Clem Yates and the two girls sat in camp-chairs near the patient, and there was, of course, plenty to talk about.

"I suppose you'll soon be going back to the ranch?" Anita Youner presently suggested, smiling at Clem.

Clem shook his head. "No, I reckon not," he said, a bit shortly. "It ain't worth going back to, now that the spring and buildings belong to—well, now! Dog-gone it! I didn't see where I was headin' for. The land belongs to you now, I reckon?"

"Yes," smiled the girl, "it belongs to me. You won't find me hard to deal with, Clem."

"I ain't exactly lookin' for any favors, Miss Anita," rejoined Clem. "I was plumb outgeneraled, and I'm aimin' to take my medicine standin' up. I guess I know how you feel about it, Miss Anita, but—well, I understand you're comin' into maybe a million right soon, and you'd like to be liberal, but—"

"Not quite a million, Clem," the girl interrupted. "I went to see my father's old lawyer, after the funeral, and he told me there was an awful lot of debts. There'll be something left over, he says, but it won't be enough to get careless with, you know.

"But listen, Clem, have you forgotten all about your cattle? The Mexicans are all gone now, and the sheep are in charge of white men. Two of them are looking after your cattle. They're all right and they're all there and the men are ready to drive them home, the minute you say the word!"

"THANKS, Miss Anita!" said Clem, a little embarrassed. "I'd almost give them up for lost. But maybe you'd like to buy the half interest back? I ain't any too well fixed for ready cash, and it would suit me fine if you'd take over that half interest."

"Maybe I will," replied the girl, and Clem smiled when she glanced speculatively at his pal.

"But about that land deal," the girl went on. "I got after the lawyer with a sharp stick and made him own up to the dirty trick they played on you. But with all their smartness they overlooked a bet, at that. You see, I kept right on digging at the lawyer, thinking that if you'd made a mistake they might have made one too, and finally I found out where they slipped. The buildings and the spring are on your part of the land, after all!"

"The dev—Excuse me, Miss Anita! I plumb forgot myse'f. But how come you think the spring is on my land?"

"There's some funny things about

this correctin' line, as they call it," replied the girl, with a smile. "One thing is the double row of section corner mounds; the other is that each of the lots joining the line on the south has sixty-two and a fraction acres in it. I found this out when I looked at the deed. And it seemed sort of odd, for the forties all showed the same size on the map, you know. I figured something was wrong.

"Anyhow I shot it at the lawyer, and he finally acknowledged that they'd overlooked this point. He said these lots were actually about one hundred and twenty-four rods long north and south, instead of the regulation eighty. Now suppose you move the south line of your lot four—move it twenty-four rods south of where you've always thought it was. Then where would your spring be located?"

"By George! It would be on lot four, and that's shore my land. And the funny thing about it; I'd heard about these long forties, or lots, long before I ever saw that ranch. Only I didn't have sense enough to think about it."

"Well, interposed Ben, with a wide grin at his pal, "I reckon that settles everything plumb serene, so you won't have no call to swell around and rear up on yore hine legs and refuse any favors."

"And furthermore," Anita added, "you might just as well get used to calling Ben 'pardner' again. And I reckon you ought to practice up calling me 'pardner,' too. You see, when Ben and myself get married, we'll sort of just make the spread one big ranch again with you and Gerta."

"Why, I—" Ben blushed.

"I know," Anita continued. "You haven't proposed yet. Well, gosh, Ben! You can't expect a girl to wait forever till you get up courage. Can you?"

Ben turned to Clem.

"Now what can you do with a girl like that?" he queried.

"Marry her," Clem grinned.

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FIGHT IT OUT!

by OSCAR SCHISGALL

With a lone-gun bucking in his hand, Tip Harrow fought, with whistling lead, the gang of bushwhack killers whoe owlboot lead threatened his home and herds.

Chapter I

TROUBLE AT THE CABIN

IT WAS the sound of hoofbeats, galloping furiously across the grassy floor of the valley, that woke Tip Harrow. He sat up in his bunk with a star. Still blinking sleep out of his eyes, he reached instinctively for the holstered six-gun that hung by its belt on a peg in the wall.

Through the cabin window he could see a crescent moon hanging low over the mountains in the west. It was after midnight, he judged. To have anybody approach the isolated cabin at this hour would in itself have been surprising. But to hear

somebody galloping toward it at mad speed—

"Sure sounds like trouble," Tip muttered, frowning.

He rose with the six-gun in his hand and crossed the cabin. Fortunately he hadn't bothered to undress, save to kick off his boots. Now, as he opened the door, he had the dazed sensation of being somewhere between sleep and wakefulness—a fantastic realm of nightmare.

The first thing he saw in the darkness was his own cayuse. Staked near a stunted oak, the little pinto stood stiff-legged, ears nervously raised.

"So it's got you scared, too, has it?" growled Tip.

He scowled across the moonlit valley. Here and there he could see dark masses of his own grazing cattle. And far beyond them he discerned a black shadow darting swiftly in the direction of the cabin.

"Well, anyhow, it's only one rider," he thought a bit grimly. "No use gettin' excited till we know what's what."

He moved back a few paces to draw on his boots. He buckled the holster-belt around his waist. With a quick gesture he brushed disheveled dark hair out of his eyes. He was a tall man, lean and slightly bow-legged — a man, you would have guessed, who had lived most of his life in a saddle.

Returning to the open door, he waited there, legs slightly parted. Though he didn't actually hold the six-gun now, he kept his thumbs hooked in his belt. The frown never left his bony young countenance until, of a sudden, it gave way to an expression of astonishment.

The oncoming rider, he saw, was a girl.

No mistaking that slit riding skirt, that slight figure, the rakish creamy Stetson that would have been the butt of many a joke had a cowpuncher dared to wear it.

And then Tip Harrow thought, Blazes! It's Kay Anderson!"

She was within a hundred yards of the cabin now and still riding hard. He was about to step out to meet her, when she cried in a shrill, desperate voice, "Bricktop! Bricktop!"

That amazed Tip Harrow all the more.

"So she expected to find old Bricktop Bates here," he mumbled. With a renewed frown he moved out of the cabin just as the girl reined in her steaming horse.

She pulled leather so hard that the animal reared. At the sight of Tip her lips parted. Her eyes grew round in amazement. In the moonlight she looked lovelier than ever.

"Tip!" she blurted.

He forced a grin. "What's all the excitement, Miss Kay?"

Still mounted, she gasped, "I—I kind of thought I'd find old Bricktop Bates here!"

"Bricktop," Tip told her, "was taken sick a couple of days ago. Something wrong with his stomach. Reckon when a man gets to be in his sixties he's got to expect a little trouble now and then."

"And—and you took his place yourself?"

"Didn't have anybody else I could send up here, so I came—yeah." His geniality faded slightly, and a new sharpness came into his voice. "What's the matter? You sure look like you've been racing the devil across this valley."

KAY ANDERSON moistened her lips. Now that he could see her more clearly, he realized that she was frightened, pale. She sent a sudden glance over her shoulder. Then, as if on impulse, she swung out of the saddle and came to Tip.

"You've got to get away from here!" she whispered. "Now! Immediately!"

He looked at her in bewilderment. "How come? What's the idea?"

"Please, Tip! I — I can't explain! You've just got to go!"

"But why?" Again he pushed dan-

gling hair back from his forehead. "Doggone it, Miss Kay, that's a might unreasonable request, seems like. After all, I got six hundred head of longhorns in this valley. Why should I leave them?"

He watched her closely, saw her hesitate. Her fingers curled into tight fists, then were distended again.

"Tip, I can't tell you much," she pleaded in that same desperate voice. "If you stay here, you'll be killed!" child, prattling nonsense. 'Why in tarnation should anyone want to kill me?"

Instead of replying, Kay Anderson suddenly looked miserable. Something like a shudder shook her. She cried softly, "Oh, why did you ever come into this valley? You don't belong here, Tip! This is no place for you!"

"Now, looka here, Miss Kay," he said gently, "suppose you mosey into the cabin and rest a spell. I'll boil up a pot o' coffee. That'll make you feel easier."

"No—I—"

But he had already caught her arm and was leading her to the door. As they moved on, he said in that same calm voice:

"As to why I came to this valley, it was the only way I could see of saving my stock. The drought was terrible down on the flats. There didn't seem to be any end to it. Day after day I'd see cows drop dead. Some of them I had to shoot. It was pretty awful, Miss Kay."

"I know," bitterly.

"So I started scoutin' for grass. Up here in this mountain valley, sixty miles from my own outfit, I found plenty of it. Good and green, with a couple of mountain streams tricklin' out of the hills. Course, this valley was a little closer to the Mexican Border than I cared to be. I don't hanker to get mixed up in Border trouble. Still, I didn't have much choice. I poked around a bit, found that the land was owned by the Acme Mining Corporation, which wasn't usin' it at all. So I leased the valley an' its grass for two years. It was the only way I could see of savin' what was left of my stock. I poked six hundred head into this valley—and here we are. Does that answer your question?"

They were in the cabin now. Kay Anderson muttering, "Yes, yes," sank stiffly to the edge of the cot. There was tension in her whole slim figure as she watched Tip Harrow turn to the fireplace.

"I don't want coffee," she blurted. "I've got to get away from here!"

He peered at her keenly. "I've been talking," he said, "just to get you calmed down. Now suppose you tell me. Why did you ride out this hour o' night to see Bricktop Bates?"

"I came," she flung out, "because in a few minutes a couple of bushwhackers will be here! They're on their way to—to kill Bates or anybody else they find in this valley!"

Tip Harrow stood very still. Even while the echoes of the girl's voice still seemed to fill the cabin, he heard something else—the distant thuds of hoofbeats.

He jerked up his head, listened intently. His lips tightened; his eyes became narrow.

"That them?"

Kay Anderson sprang to her feet, her face ghastly. "It must be!"

"Who are they?"

"Cheyenne Lockert and Red Farley!"

"A couple o' your uncle's cowpunchers?" in surprise.

"Yes."

"But—but why do they hanker to kill Bricktop Bates? What's he done to them?"

The girl ignored the question. She had to run to the door. In the moonlight she could see two horsemen less than a quarter of a mile away.

"I can't leave now," she whispered. "They mustn't see me! If they do—if my uncle finds out I came here to warn Bricktop—"

Tip Harrow snapped, "All right.

You stay in the cabin. I'll go out and palaver with those buzzards. They don't have to know you're here."

"They'll see my horse!"

"I'll take care of that."

TIP strode out to the girl's mare. It was still panting and sweating after its hard gallop. To Kay Anderson's astonishment, he led the horse into the cabin. Chuckling slightly, he hitched it to a peg in the wall.

"They sure won't hunt for a horse in here. Besides, I won't let them come in."

She cried, "But you can't go out! They'll shoot!"

"Me? What for?"

"Oh, Tip," she said in despair, "I wish I could explain it to you! They want to get you and your outfit out of this valley. You're in their way. Don't you understand?"

He looked at her in silence for a few seconds, then slowly nodded. "Uh-huh," he muttered, "I'm beginning to savvy plenty. Well—" He hitched up his gun-belt. "—you wait in here. We'll see what happens."

The girl warned fiercely, "They didn't come to talk. They'll shoot first! For heaven's sake, Tip, be careful!"

He said quietly, "I'll be careful, all right—plenty careful."

Then he walked out of the cabin.

The two riders were less than a hundred yards away. At the sight of him they instantly drew rein. They stared, exchanged a few whispered words. Clearly, they were astonished to see him here instead of old Bricktop Bates.

Tip Harrow called, "Hi, gents! What's all the celebratin' for?"

There was no answer. At any rate, there wasn't an answer in words. Instead, one of the men dropped his right arm. Instantly there were two flashes of red at his hip. Two shots cracked through the night's stillness, and bullets spanged into the wall of the cabin beside Tip.

Chapter II

THE WAR BEGINS

IT HAPPENED so quickly, so completely without warning, that Tip Harrow's reaction was instinctive. A gasped, "What in hell!" burst from him. He crouched low, drew his own six-gun, let it blaze.

As he fired, his face grim and drawn, he saw both men hurl themselves out of their saddles. They fell flat in the high grass, face down, like Indians. Their horses ran off a few yards. But the men themselves, buried in that grass, had disappeared.

"Damn them!" rasped Tip, more bewildered than angry. "What—what the devil is it all about?"

A low, fierce voice behind him whispered, "Come in here! Don't stand out there and fight men you can't even see!"

The girl was right. Tip backed into the cabin, slammed the door shut. Then he stepped to a window and peered through its corner toward the spot where the two riders had vanished. He could see nothing of them.

"Chances are they'll separate and wait till I show myself outdoors," he rapped out. "When I do, they'll make plenty smoke." Over his shoulder he shot a swift glance at the girl. "You say your uncle sent these polecats?"

He could see wretchedness in her features as she jerkily nodded.

"Why?" he demanded. "What's he got against me? I hardly know the man! Met him only once—the time you and he came into the general store over at Pottstown: Why should he want to kill me?"

She cried, "Tip, I—I can't explain it to you now!"

"Me, I can't think of a better time to do it."

She stood silent — trembling, it seemed to him. Tip, the six-gun in his hand, continued to watch for some sign of the two riders. If he spotted them, he intended to fire at once.

He was surprised to hear the girl behind him ejaculate, "All right! I'll

tell you. My uncle has been using this valley for years. I don't know what for. Most of the time I've been away in St. Louis at school. When I finished school, he insisted on my coming to his ranch. He's the only kin I've got. I don't know much about his business, except that tonight I heard him send those two men with orders to kill Bricktop Bates. I knew Bricktop pretty well. He used to ride over to our ranch now and then just for a friendly visit. I couldn't stand the idea of his being murdered—or of letting my uncle become mixed up in a murder!"

"So you came here to warn him?"

"Yes."

"Mighty white of you, Miss Kay. I—"

And then an idea struck Tip Harrow. A strange idea. One that brought queer lights into his triangular gray eyes.

He swung away from the window. The girl and her horse occupied half the cabin. On the other side, propped against the wall, were two boards.

"By thunder!" he said tensely. "I was going to build myself a new bunk. Had those boards all ready for it. Seems to me, though, I got a better use for them now!"

"What are you going to do?"

"No point to waiting till one of those coyotes wriggles up close enough to take a shot at me when my head shows in the window. I can't fight them unless I can see them. So here goes!"

Still peering keenly through the window, Tip Harrow stripped off his shirt. He backed to one of the boards. It had several cross strips nailed to it, and on one of these he draped the shirt.

"Lucky I got an extra pair of dungarees around," he chuckled. "Otherwise, Miss Kay, I'd make you feel mighty immodest by pullin' off my pants. As it is—"

He finished by drawing a pair of old dungarees from a wall peg. These he hung under the shirt. Atop the whole thing he placed his sombrero.

"What's the idea?" she whispered in amazement.

"I'm goin' to get those two tarantulas to show themselves! Once they get up out of that high grass and come hightailin' this way, I reckon I can handle them fine. Watch!"

He held the board, draped in clothes, by one of its cross pieces. The thing now resembled a scarecrow—a gaunt creature wearing sombrero, shirt, and overalls.

"Just keep away from the door," Tip warned.

He pulled the door open. Keeping well behind the wall, he thrust the figure out as far as the threshold. At the same time he yelled loudly:

"Hey, you hombres! I don't know what you came shooting for, but seems to me you must o' made some mistake. If you'll come out here like men and palaver—"

That was as far as he got.

THERE were two shots. Two bullets cracked into the board, tore it out of his hands. As the thing fell back on the cabin floor, Tip Harrow screamed. He let out a shriek that might have done justice to a man mortally wounded. Just that single howl of agony—then silence.

Instantly he leaped to the window, the six-gun back in his hand. He watched excitedly, his heart pounding. He heard a voice yell:

"Got him!"

And another voice roared, "Plumb in the heart!"

Then, amazingly close to the cabin, two figures leaped out of the grass. They were some fifty yards apart. Brandishing six-guns, they came dashing straight toward the door.

That was when Tip Harrow fired.

They saw him at the window just as he levelled his weapon. The nearer man dodged, but it was too late. Tip's bullet caught him in the chest, and he sprawled headlong in the grass.

The other man—Cheyenne Lockert—took a single shot at the window.

But because he was diving into the shelter of the grass while he fired, his bullet went wild, hit the roof.

Ignoring the pallid girl behind him, Tip ran out of the cabin. He raced toward the spot where Cheyenne Lockert had disappeared. But he'd gone scarcely fifty feet when he caught the sounds of a horse galloping away somewhere to his left.

At that he spun around with an oath, lifted his gun. In the moonlight he could see Lockert hunched over his saddlehorn, dashing off at a furious speed. In rage he sent two bullets after the man.

"Come back here, you yellow-spined coyote!" he bellowed. "If you've got any guts, come here and fight it out like a man!"

But Cheyenne Lockert wasn't listening. He continued to gallop away at wild speed. With his partner shot down, he apparently had no desire to continue the battle single-handed.

Tip waited until he was out of range. Then he ran to the spot where the other man, Red Farley, had fallen.

He found Farley stretched face-down in the grass. When he rolled the bulky figure over on its back, Tip's lips became a thin, grim slash.

"Dead!" he muttered.

His face was hard and colorless as he lifted it to squint again after the departing Cheyenne Lockert. He knelt there, unmoving, for a full minute.

Presently a sound behind him made him turn. Kay Anderson, utterly white of countenance, was leading her horse out of the cabin.

He said tightly, "I sure owe you plenty of thanks, Miss Kay. If you hadn't brought that warning, they might have caught me asleep. They'd have plugged me, sure as—"

She interrupted in awe, "You—killed Red?"

"Had to!"

"I—I guess you did." She gulped hard, stopped, staring down at the dead man with wide eyes. Then she shivered. "Oh, I wish you hadn't had to do it!"

"I didn't have much choice. It was shoot them or be killed myself."

"I know. But—this is bound to be the beginning of trouble."

"It's no trouble of my making," grimly.

He straightened to his lanky height. Suddenly the girl came to him, dropped a hand on his arm. She looked up into his eyes importunately.

"Tip, why don't you leave? Why don't you go back to your ranch?"

"Why should I? What about my cattle? What about my two-year lease on this valley?"

"They won't mean anything if you are dead!"

He said harshly, "Well, I don't aim to be driven out like this! If there's going to be trouble, let it come. I aim to stay here and—fight it out!"

"But—"

"Why shouldn't I?" savagely. "I've never done your uncle any harm. I hardly know him. He has no reason to come slingin' lead at me. Or to send his yeller-backed cowpokes to do it for him. When you get to him, Miss Kay, tell him that if he hankers to keep fiightin' I'll always have plenty of bullets ready any time his men come around!"

Chapter III

THE SHERIF STEPS IN

TIP HARROW didn't sleep after Kay Anderson rode away that night. He sat on the cabin's doorstep and frowned thoughtfully at the moonlit body of Red Farley, stretched in front of him. In the morning he intended to drape the stocky figure over the back of the horse that still grazed out there under trees; intended to lead it to Sheriff Tate at Pottstown, seven miles away.

Meanwhile he sat and thought.

Strangely, he thought more about Kay Anderson than about her uncle. He remembered his first meeting with her on a day when he and Bricktop Bates had gone to Pottstown for supplies. She'd struck him then as one of the loveliest girls he'd ever encountered. He remembered how their eyes had met and how a bag full of canned goods had fallen out of her arms to scatter over the floor. They'd laughed together while he helped her gather the cans. Later he'd carried her bundles out to a waiting buckboard.

And there he had met her uncle, Jed Anderson—a stocky, gray-haired rancher with an uncompromising square face.

He hadn't liked Anderson. There had been something about the man that was hostile from the very start. What it was, he couldn't analyze. They'd exchanged very few words. Stiff backed, his head raised, Anderson had driven his niece out of Pottstown without once glancing back.

"So now he's got it in for me," Tip reflected, "because I've settled in this valley. Queer. What's he want the valley for, anyhow? He's got a big enough spread of his own—and it ain't been bothered much by drought."

He considered the problem for hours. By the time the gray light of dawn began to well out of the east, Tip believed he'd struck a solution. But it was so strange and shocking an idea that it left him more uneasy than ever.

He rose finally, turned into the cabin, and cooked himself some breakfast. When he emerged again, the sun rode low in the east—a blinding sun that accentuated the green loveliness of the mountain valley.

Tip rounded up Red Farley's horse. He slung the body over its saddle. Then he got his own cayuse. And five minutes later he was leading the dead man toward Pottstown.

But he'd gone scarcely a mile when he abruptly drew rein and stared.

Far down the trail, almost a mile away, he could see a dust cloud. He bent forward over the saddlehorn, squinted, and discovered presently that seven riders were heading this way. They weren't galloping. They were coming at a steady, purposeful lope. Yet the sight of them started a new thudding in his heart. He felt his nerves tighten. He sent a quick glance back at the dangling figure of Red Farley, and his right hand started for his six-gun.

"But what's the use?" he thought, checking the gesture. "If this is Anderson's crowd, I can't shoot it out against seven o' them!"

It struck him, however, that Anderson would hardly bring his men in daylight. If Cheyenne Lockert had hightailed straight back to the Anderson ranch with news of what had happened, a punitive party would have come out to the valley hours ago.

Still, for the sake of safety, Tip decided to wait among nearby boulders, where he could remain hidden until he was sure of these men. He didn't believe he himself had yet been seen, for he'd drawn his rose to a stop in the shadows of some cottonwoods at the edge of a bend in the trail.

Now he turned and pulled the dead man in among the rocks.

He stood on his horse's back, reached to the top of a boulder, and pulled himself to its summit. Perched there, concealed by a screen of intervening trees, he could watch the oncoming riders.

And presently he recognized two of them.

The first caused him a catch of breath. It was the stocky, bull-headed figure of Jed Anderson!

Riding beside the rancher, however, was another man whose presence puzzled Tip. At the same time it promised safety, too. For the man at Anderson's side — a silver-haired, lanky figure—was Sheriff Tate of Pottstown.

"Now what the devil have they got

in mind?" Tip muttered, scowling. "If they've come for Red Farley's body—"

He decided, of a sudden, to return to the trail and meet the group boldly. After all, he had done nothing for which he need fear the law. To hide now, to behave like a fugitive, might be far from wise. The best course, he persuaded himself, was the straight-forward one.

So, reassured by the sheriff's presence, he lowered himself from the boulder to the back of his cayuse. A moment later he rode out again to the trail, leading the body of the dead man.

Tip Harrow was never to forget that meeting.

When he encountered the seven riders, it seemed to him that most of them—particularly Sheriff Tate—were surprised to find him leading Red Farley's body in the direction of Pottstown. Despite their astonishment, however, there was hard and unmistakable hostility on every face. He didn't know the five men behind the sheriff and Jed Anderson. In all probability, he told himself, they were some more of Anderson's riders. But he couldn't be certain.

SHERIFF TATE stared through a long silence at the body that had been Red Farley. He drew a heavy breath. Without otherwise moving, he shifted his eyes to peer narrowly at Tip Harrow.

"Where were you headin', hombre, with that carcass?"

"Pottstown. To turn it over to you."

"How come?"

"I didn't know what else to do with it. Didn't feel like burying it up near my cabin."

Sheriff Tate, whose lean body looked as if it had been dried by desert heat, sent an oblique and vaguely perplexed glance at Jed Anderson. The rancher's square countenance seemed to be repressing fury. Tate cleared his throat.

"Reckon you know, Harrow, why I'm here."

"Can't say as I do, Sheriff."

"To arrest you."

Tip started. He was still in the saddle, and his left hand tightened its grip on the horn. "Arrest me? What for?"

"The murder of Red Farley."

"I didn't murder him! I shot him because he—"

"Sorry. We got an eye-witness."

A sense of confusion was beginning to well in Tip Harrow's mind. He looked from the sheriff to Jed Anderson and then at the other five men. For a moment nobody spoke. It was he who finally snapped:

"An eye-witness? Who?"

"Cheyenne Lockert."

"Why, that tarantula—!"

"Hold on, Harrow." At that instant something miraculous happened; something magical. Sheriff Hiram Tate hardly stirred. You would have sworn that he had moved no part of his body except his fingers. Yet incredibly his six-gun was suddenly in his hand, levelled straight at Tip Harrow's chest. "I'm declarin' you under arrest, Harrow," he said quietly. "Reckon I'd better warn you that anything you say from now on can be used against you."

Tip stared at the steady six-gun. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"Looka here, Sheriff! I didn't murder this man! If I'd murdered him, would I be totin' him to Pottstown like this?"

"Maybe and maybe not," dryly. "We got Cheyenne Lockert's word for what happened. He claims as how he saw it all."

With bitterness he could not suppress, Tip Harrow demanded, "Just what kind of lies did Cheyenne tell you?"

"Reckon," Sheriff Tate snapped to Anderson, "y o u 'd better repeat Cheyenne's story, Jed. You was the one who heard it first."

Jed nodded jerkily, eyes flaring.

"Accordin' to Cheyenne," he rapped out tersely, "he and Red Farley had been nighthawkin'. Along about midnight they got to talkin' about Bricktop Bates. Figured he was alone up here in the valley—probably havin' a lonely time of it. So they kind of thought that for a lark they'd ride up and get him out of bed and hold a little friendly powwow."

Jed Anderson paused. It was Tip himself who grated:

"Go on. Let's hear the rest of it!"

"Seems like when Cheyenne and Red rode up to the cabin in the valley, this hombre—" with a nod at Tip, "stepped out of his door. Without statin' a why or wherefore, he pulled iron and blazed away. Shot Red Farley plumb out of his saddle. Started firin' at Cheyenne, too. Only Cheyenne figured he was facin' a crazy man. So he bent low and hightailed away. He brought the news home."

After that Tip Harrow drew a hard breath. His lips were tightly compressed as he whispered:

"And on the basis o' that cockeyed lie you're arrestin' me, sheriff?"

"Yep," snapped Sheriff Tate, "you're under arrest for the murder of Red Farley."

"And," angrily added Jed Anderson, "you'll hang for it!"

Chapter IV

THE DAYS OF SUSPENSE

TIP HARROW'S face was gray and his voice was brittle when he told Sheriff Tate his own story of what had happened. He told everything—except the fact that Kay had been to his cabin.

The girl's attitude, as much as her words, had warned him that it would be safest to keep her name out of this. If her uncle suspected that she had interfered, had turned against him, the chances were, Tip reasoned, that Kay Anderson would encounter some very trying days. So he said nothing about her. But he told in grim detail everything that had happened between him and the two night visitors.

"That's crazy!" loudly exploded Jed Anderson the instant he finished. "Why should my boys want to bushwhack him?"

"I'll tell you why!" Tip said quietly. He paused, and there was strange tension in the sudden hush. "I figured it out pretty well last night. The valley where I've got my stock runs clear down to the Rio Grande and the Mexican Border. It would be a natural highway for anybody dealin' with folks on the Mexican side."

While he spoke, he could see Jed Anderson's massive countenance begin to lose color. Twice the rancher looked as if he were about to interrupt. But Tip drove on relentlessly:

"Anybody smugglin', for example—or runnin' wet cattle into Mexico—or maybe from Mexico into the States—could use my valley! There's nobody been in it for years till I came along. The way I figured it out, Anderson, by bein' in that valley I'm most likely buttin' into your business. The smugglin' business!"

"Why, damn you—!"

"Wait! Let me finish. I remember when I first came into this part of the country I heard stories about strange Mexican brands found on stray cattle in these parts. Also, a couple of small ranchers told me of how their rustled stock disappeared and was never found again. They figured it went to the other side of the Rio Grande, but they had no proof. Well, I got to thinkin' last night. Maybe I've struck it right, hey, Anderson? Maybe my valley was the road through which you drove other people's stock for—"

As if he could no longer restrain his rage, Jed Anderson drew his

six-gun. Even as it rose, however, Sheriff Tate, striking with the speed of a snake, banged his own weapon down on the rancher's hand. Anderson's gun fell to the trail.

"None of that!" snapped Tate. "If there's any shootin' around here, I'll do it!" He turned flaming eyes to Tip Harrow. "You got anything to back up that accusation of yours?"

"No," with a touch of sarcasm. "It's just an idea that sort o' came in the night, like a dream—and judgin' by Anderson's face, it's the right idea. That's why he wanted to kill whoever was up in that valley—Bricktop Bates or me. So there wouldn't be any witnesses to see cattle poked toward Mexico—or maybe in this direction. I'm in the way up there. That's why Anderson wants me out by hook or crook!"

Anderson grated, "That's a lie!" His countenance had gone purple. Swinging to the sheriff, he rasped, "We don't have to listen to this! You're arrestin' this man for murder! Why don't you drag him into town and have done with it? Or let's save the State money and hang him right here!"

Sheriff Tate, however, had no desire to save the State money in that particular manner. He ordered Anderson to retrieve and holster his six-gun. Then, to the five men behind him, he said, "All right, gents. We'll head back for town with the prisoner."

"My story of what happened last night don't count for anything?" demanded Tip Harrow. "I'm still under arrest?"

"Long as Cheyenne Lockert stands ready to swear against you as an eye-witness," declared Tate, "you're under arrest—yep. Let's get going!"

So they rode on toward Pottstown, Tip's rage boiling.

It was futile for him to resist when the sheriff removed the six-gun from his holster. He rode ahead of the others, with Tate at his back. He frowned, turbulent eyes fixed on the ground. Just how all this was going to end, it was impossible to foresee. Would a jury accept Cheyenne Lockert's version of the killing in preference to his own? If it did, there wasn't much hope. He thought miserably of Kay Anderson, who'd been a witness—

And when they reached Pottstown, Kay surprised him.

SHE WAS waiting in the shadow of the dilapidated little 'dobe jail—a slim figure, her chin lifted defiantly. Her horse's reins were in her hand. She stood on the jail's steps, unmoving, until the perplexed sheriff, leading his prisoner, reached her.

"Hi, Miss Kay," Tate muttered. "What's up?"

She said tightly, "I just heard over at the ranch what was happening—that you'd gone to the valley to arrest Tip Harrow for murder."

"Right."

"It wasn't murder!"

"What d'you mean? How do you know?"

She sent a sharp, challenging glance—a look like a stab—at her uncle. Then she snapped, "I know because I was there! I saw everything that happened!"

"Kay!" Tip blurted.

She said to him firmly, "There's no use keeping quiet any longer. I'm not going to let them hang you for something you didn't do." She swung back to the sheriff. Before anyone could intervene, she told him precisely what had happened—how she had overheard the plan to murder Bricktop Bates, how she had dashed out to the valley to find Tip there, how she had warned him, how the two men had arrived, and how Red Farley had died.

When she finished, Sheriff Tate turned in wonder to the stunned Jed Anderson.

"What in thunder is this?" he de-

manded. "You sent men to murder this hombre?"

"No!" Though it looked as if Jed were about to roar, the word issued as in a vicious whisper. His face was mottled and congested. He looked staggered. "No, it's a lie! I never did!"

"But your own niece—"

"I don't care what she says!"

"Jed, she's swearin' she was up at that cabin last night."

"Maybe so." A hint of withering sarcasm came into Jed Anderson's voice. "I can't keep tabs on her if she decides to go visit men in mountain cabins. That's her own business. But as for my sendin' anybody to commit murder—it's a lie, I tell you!"

"Well, now—" Sheriff Tate cleared his throat. He looked speculatively from Jed Anderson to his niece. After a while he spat into the road. Pushing his sombrero to the back of his head, he rubbed a hand across his dry mouth and added, "Jed, nobody's asked me to press a case against you yet. I ain't arrestin' you. Right now I'm concerned about this gent, Tip Harrow. If we bring him to trial on Cheyenne Lockert's evidence, and your own niece swears that Cheyenne lied, we ain't goin' to get so far. I arrested this man on your say-so. With your niece standin' up against you, though, are you still pressin' charges?"

Jed Anderson's stormy eyes were fixed on Kay. Some message—silent yet eloquent — passed between the two. It seemed to Tip, who watched narrowly, that a threat lay in Jed Anderson's expression. In Kay's face, on the other hand, were defiance and determination.

Suddenly Jed Anderson said something that astounded everyone. He rasped:

"All right, Sheriff! You can let this man go, for all it concerns me! I'd just as soon believe my niece as Cheyenne Lockert. If she says that my boys fired first—maybe it's so. Maybe they was drunk. But as for my sendin' anybody to bushwhack Tip Harrow, that's a lie!"

"Then—" Sheriff Tate himself seemed bewildered. "You aint pressin' charges against Harrow? You're willin' to let him go?"

"Plumb to hell, for all I care!"

Chapter V

SHOW-DOWN

OF TWO things Tip Harrow felt positive when he returned to the mountain valley: First, that his feud with Jed Anderson had by no means been settled; second, that he had stumbled upon the truth when he had accused Anderson of using the valley to smuggle rustled cattle across the Border. The very expression in the rancher's eyes had convinced him that his guess had hit a bull's-eye.

So, when he settled down to riding range in the valley again, watching his several hundred head of longhorns, it was with the sensation that trouble, like a thunderstorm, might burst upon him at any moment.

"Anderson," he reasoned, "is probably as anxious as ever to get me out of here. And me, I'm as dog-gone determined as ever to stay. I paid for the use of this land. I aim to have it." He scowled toward purple mountain tops. "Chances are Anderson will hit out at me again pretty soon. When he does, probably it'll be the same way as last time—in darkness, without warning. I sure got to keep my eyes open!"

So, as he rode herd during those next few days, he was constantly on guard. Every strange sound made him start, made his hand leap to his six-gun. It wasn't the cows he watched as much as the surrounding country. His ears were eternally strained for sounds.

And yet, for almost two weeks nothing happened.

There was something uncanny in the very suspension of events. He wondered a great deal about Jed Anderson. Yet he wondered more about Kay.

He wanted desperately to see her, to talk to her again, to thank her. Yet to seek her out on Anderson's land would have been worse than foolhardy. That, to him, was now forbidden territory. And the fact that she didn't come to the mountain cabin—well, he could hardly blame her. After all, there was no reason for her to incur such a risk. No doubt she had drawn enough of her uncle's rage by this time.

"I still got a year and a half to stay in this valley," Tip Harrow told himself. "Until that year and a half is out, neither Jed Anderson nor anybody else is going to drive me away!"

He wished that he had the money to hire a few hands. It would certainly help to have support—somebody who could be awake and on guard while he himself slept.

The trouble was that all his cash had gone into the lease of this valley. The only man he could afford to keep on his payroll was old Bricktop Bates; and Bricktop had been sent to the city with stomach trouble. So Tip had to face the ordeal alone.

It was an Indian who finally brought him news from Kay.

The man, squat and ragged, walked out to the mountain valley late one afternoon. He owned no horse. Apparently he'd been given a few cents to bring this message.

When he approached the cabin, Tip had some fear of trickery. He waited with one hand hooked in his gunbelt. But the Indian proved peaceful enough. He handed Tip a letter, sat down for a while to rest, then started back for town.

Tip tore the note open with nervous fingers and read:

Dear Tip:—

I've been wanting to talk to you ever since that day. Uncle Jed has forbidden it, of course, and I didn't want to cause more trouble by riding out to the valley again. I'm being watched too closely. Tonight, however, I'm going to sleep at Jane Cromwell's home in Bottstown. It's her birthday and we're having a little party. I promised to stay over. It seems to me that if you could ride in to the Cromwell house, we might have a chance to talk. Don't get there before midnight. I'll be watching for you. I'll come out.

KAY.

The note, as he was to discover later, was genuine enough. Kay herself had written it in the best of faith. What Tip didn't know as he read it now—what he couldn't guess—was that the Indian had been stopped on the way to the mountain valley.

He'd been stopped by Cheyenne Lockert, who had been stationed to guard the trail to town and thus keep a watch on Tip Harrow's movements.

Cheyenne, seeing the letter in the Indian's hand, had taken it at the point of a gun. He'd opened it, read it, then sealed the envelope again.

"If you tell Harrow about me," he'd warned, "I'll plug you next time we meet! Savvy?"

No, Tip Harrow could guess nothing of this. . . .

SO SHORTLY after eleven o'clock that night he swung into his saddle and started for Pottstown. The prospect of seeing Kay again filled him with a strange, reckless joy he couldn't suppress. It was a sensation that overwhelmed everything else—even fear of her uncle. He rode with buoyant spirits that manifested themselves in a tight smile.

For two miles, as he loped along the moonlit mountain trail, nothing happened. He came to a point where the trail bordered a stream that sang gaily as it tumbled out of the hills. His gaze followed a mass of rock that covered a little hill at his right.

And it was while he was gazing upward that he heard the neigh of a horse.

That was the only warning he had.

He reined in, caught his breath. He seized his six-gun and sat rigid. Then he flung out loudly into the darkness ahead:

"Who's that?"

There was no answer.

Yet it seemed to him that somewhere on his left he could detect the sound of a low-voiced oath—probably a rider cursing the horse that had neighed.

Tip looked around wildly. He had the sudden panicky feeling of having ridden into a trap. So far there was no concrete evidence to corroborate that idea, yet he could take no chances. He glanced from left to right, seeking shelter. Then his gaze climbed the hill that was crowned by boulders.

"A—a kind of fortress!" he told himself tensely. "Reckon it'll have to do till I see what's what around here."

He swung out of his saddle, slapped his horse away, and started climbing the hill. He scrambled up up rapidly, like a monkey. And he'd gone hardly half way to the top when somewhere behind him a voice yelled:

"There he goes!"

Simultaneously with that cry came the sound of a shot—and another.

Tip Harrow gasped. He heard a bullet click on stone two feet from his head. There were more shots—and something burned fiercely in the calf of his left leg.

"Damn 'em!" he gasped hoarsely. "Dirty drygulchers!"

By that time he was at the top of the hill. He leaped over a rock and fell sprawling among boulders, just as another shower of lead pattered on the stones. He yanked out his own weapon, found a slit between two rocks, and levelled the gun at the dark ground below.

He saw a flash of red as a weapon blazed. Using that flame as a target, Tip fired. But he had no means of knowing whether or not he'd hit the man.

Then, inexplicably, there was a sudden stillness. Out of it came a harsh voice he recognized with a violent start as Jed Anderson's. It said:—

"Harrow, can you hear me?"

"I can smell you," he grated. "I always smell polecats. What is it?"

"We're five to one against you! Fightin' ain't goin' to do you any good."

"What's it you want?"

"I'm givin' you a chance to get away with your life!"

"Highty white of you, Anderson. Mighty white! Just what does that mean?"

"I'll be frank." Anderson's voice rose from some indeterminate spot in the darkness beyond brush. "I want that valley where you're settled. If you'll give me your word that you'll be out of it within the next week—you and your stock—"

"Like hell I will! I paid for the use of that land, and I aim to stay!"

"You can't stay—not when my men and me are dead set on drivin' you out."

"Start drivin' any time you're ready, Anderson!"

"I'm givin' you this last warning," harshly. "If you'd rather fight it out now, like this—with five of us against you—that's all right with me."

"You can come chargin' up this hill any time you've a mind to!" Tip retorted.

HE KNELT there among boulders and felt more tense than he'd ever been in his life. His eyes blazed. Somewhere, during the climb, he had lost his sombrero, and his disarrayed dark hair dangled over his forehead. The calf of his left leg was still blazing. He glanced down at it. There was blood on his dungarees. Yet he didn't think it

was a very serious wound. It couldn't be, since it hadn't incapacitated him.

Anderson's voice roared, "Harrow, you're askin' for it!"

"Come on," he shouted back, "if you've got the guts!"

Even as he spoke he saw a moving shadow some thirty yards away. It looked like the figure of a man darting from the shelter of one tree to another. Tip instantly fired.

He heard a groan, saw the shadowy thing collapse between the two trees.

"That makes four to one!" he called. "If you still figure on chargin' up this hill, Anderson, you'd better do it while you still got enough men left to back you up. I know doggone well you're too yeller to do it alone!"

He caught the sound of Anderson's oath. After that there was another hush.

It lasted many minutes—minutes which, to Tip Harrow, seemed so many hours. He couldn't understand that silence. Was it that Anderson and his men had decided to lay siege to the hill? Were they waiting for him to show himself? Were they content to spend hours crouching there till daylight helped them find their target?

He couldn't see any of them. Waiting tortured his nerves. He began to move around restlessly, seeking shadows in the darkness below. It was hopeless. Nobody seemed to be stirring. Nobody down there talked. He didn't know what to make of it.

"Once daylight comes, though," he told himself savagely, "they'll be able to take pot shots at me every time I rise to send a bullet down or to take a look around. I got to end this battle before daylight!"

But how?

He'd been a prisoner on that hilltop for almost an hour when he suddenly remembered the ruse he had used at his mountain cabin. The memory stiffened him. Why not try something like that again? If he could bring these four men out into the open—out where he could see them and blaze away at them—

Eyes fiery, heart banging, Tip looked around himself. He saw one small rock that appeared easy enough to move. He put both hands on it, shook it as a test. The thing rolled. A good shove, he realized, would send it down the far side of the hill into a mass of brush.

"Well, it's worth tryin', anyhow," he told himself grimly. "I can't stay here like this forever!"

So, after some thought he removed one of his boots. He held it upside-down and lifted part of it over the top of a rock. From a distance, in darkness, nobody would be able to determine just what it was that rose over these rocks. It might look like a man's head.

He raised it cautiously, inch by inch—and suddenly out of the blackness below crashed half a dozen shots. He heard bullets click on stone. Two slugs tore through the leather of his boot, ripped the thing out of his hand.

Instantly Tip howled in pain. At the same time he fell back to shove the small rock. It went bounding noisily down the hill to smash into brush.

"There he goes!" triumphantly roared Jed Anderson.

Below him Tip heard the rush of running men. A kind of madness overcame him. He rose brazenly to level his six-gun over the top of a rock. Below him in the darkness he distinctly saw four figures dashing toward the hill.

He fired. He blazed away again and again.

The two nearest men, caught completely off guard, plunged down with the first shots. The third leaped behind a stone and scampered for shelter.

But the fourth—a sturdy, compact figure—halted in a clearance. He gaped upward incredulously. Tip

stared at him and recognized Jed Anderson.

THEY SWERVED their guns toward each other at the same instant. Jed rasped:

"What the—"

They fired. Both guns crashed with a single sound. Tip felt something bang against the side of his head. The impact staggered him. He fell against a rock. He felt blood stream down his cheek. As his left hand rose to it, he realized he was done for. Jed Anderson's bullet had nicked the side of his head. He couldn't fight any longer. He was blinded by pain. His knees were beginning to collapse under him. His weapon slipped from his fingers to thud at his feet.

But he was aware of something else, too. He knew that Jed Anderson no longer stood down there. The stocky man was lying face-down on gravel. . . .

That was the last thing Tip Harrow saw, and it brought a twisted, bitter grin to his face.

"We fought it out, all right!" he panted. And then, as darkness rushed over his senses, he collapsed in a limp huddle among the boulders.

IT WAS fully two hours later that Tip recovered consciousness. He looked up dazedly to discover that a hand was pressing a wet cloth to the wound in his head. The hand was soft and creamy. He stared beyond it into a pallid face that made him blink.

Kay!

She was kneeling beside him, her expression desperately anxious. He tried to talk and couldn't. Now, however, his wits flooded back upon him. He became aware of other sounds. There were men everywhere—noisy men—a dozen of them. And the nearest he recognized as Sheriff Tate.

In bewilderment he whispered huskily, "What — what happened? How'd you find me?"

Kay whispered, "Mustn't talk now!"

"Tell me! I—I got to know!"

She said, "Let me do the talking then," and interrupted herself to ask miserably, "Does it hurt very much?"

"I—I'll get by. Tell me—"

"That Indian I sent with the letter," she said on a moan, "worked for the Crowells. I waited for you till one. When you didn't show up, I became terribly worried. I got hold of the Indian again, woke him up. He had told me that he'd delivered the note and that nothing else had happened. But now, when I kept shaking him, he finally broke down. He told me how Cheyenne Lockert had stopped him on the trail and read the letter. Then I realized that—that they might try to dry-gulch you tonight. So I rode to Sheriff Tate's house. I got him, and he rounded up a dozen men, and we came. But it was too late to stop the fight. We found Uncle Jed dead below the hill. Cheyenne Lockert was there, too, wounded pretty bad. Two others were dead—and you, Tip—"

He cut in weakly, "Doggone it, Kay, I'm—I'm sure sorry he was your uncle. I didn't mean to kill anybody that was kin of yours. Only I couldn't help myself. I—"

"I know," she said bitterly. "It's not your fault, Tip. Uncle Jed brought it on himself. I heard him talking. He was planning to get rid of you—and he wasn't man enough to face you square. I can't blame you, Tip."

His eyes widened as he stared up at her. Wonder came into them, and amazement, and a hint of joy. His trembling grip closed on her hand.

"Looka here, Kay," he whispered. "You mean you ain't goin' to let these killin's stand between you and me?"

"Of course not."

"Then, doggone it," whispered Tip Harrow, "reckon that despite all the shootin' this is goin' to turn out to be one o' the happiest nights o' my life. We fought it out, all right—and now maybe we can look ahead to some peace!"

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We are two American girls. As for our description: I, Delia, tower five feet three inches skyward, tip the scales at 115 pounds; have brown, curly hair, Irish-green eyes, a dimple in each cheek, and have seen 19 summers.

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Ladies, when delayed get our "Special Relief Compound **AT ONCE. Don't wait longer.** A preferred favorite time tested prescription of many doctors. **Used over 25 years.** Has rapidly relieved many irregular, unusual, overdue, delayed, late appearing abnormally suppressed menstruations, without pain or inconvenience, in **ONE TO THREE DAYS.** Many women even report successfully relieved after one or two other remedies failed. Don't use unknown or untried remedies when **you can get this valuable Compound.** Non-foeticidal. I. S. "Two months delayed. Flow started in **one day** without pain." C. L. "**Twice** delayed two and a half months. **Each time your Compound promptly relieved me.** Other remedies failed." C. W. "Delayed 9 weeks. **Had a natural flow in three days.**" Thousands, relieved, now recommend and depend on our Compound at **FIRST CHOICE WHEN SO DELAYED** because it did not disappoint them. They praise it one woman to another. Positively **QUICKER ACTING THAN PILLS OR TABLETS.** Many women who report as above say a menstrual flow started with **HALF A TREATMENT OR LESS. SATISFACTION ASSURED** with a full treatment or a package **FREE.** Proved successful by thousands. Trial 25c, stamps or coin. **ESTABLISHED FOR YEARS. SEND NO MONEY.** Pay Postman plus postage or you can absolutely depend on our reliability and send **$2.00. Special package No. 2, $3.00, two for $5.00, three for $6.50. Formula No. 3 for very slow responding conditions $5.00. DON'T DELAY.** Order today. Valuable information every woman should have with regular order. MARTHA BEASLEY, Box 22, Northwestern Station, Dept. 676, Detroit, Mich.

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Let me arrange a romantic correspondence for you. Find yourself a sweetheart thru America's foremost select social correspondence club. A friendship letter society for lonely ladies and gentlemen. Members everywhere; CONFIDENTIAL introductions by letter; efficient, dignified and continuous service. I have made thousands of lonely people happy—why not you? Write for FREE sealed particulars. Evan Moore, Box 988, Jacksonville, Fla.

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Women! Delayed?

Use **GENUINE MENSTRUA** when delayed. **REMARKABLY SPEEDY RESULTS** in many unusual, overdue difficult abnormal delays, without pain, harm or inconvenience.

QUICKER ACTING

Especially recommended where ordinary relief compounds fail, as **QUICKER ACTING** and much easier and sooner assimilated by body. Not an experiment but widely known for years, and of a type often favored by physicians.

SO COSTLY RARELY OFFERED

Costs us over 300% more than ordinary relief compounds, our costs you no more! Tasteless, easy to take. Contains no dope, no narcotics, no opiates, no habit-forming drugs, no harsh, drastic mineral poisons to punish the body—only pure, harmless, laboratory tested vegetable ingredients used for many years by physicians all over the world. Absolutely safe to take, for women report no bad effects at all, after the flow was restored.

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Wonderful, enthusiastic testimonials. M. I. "2 months overdue. Tried different remedies and nothing worked except Menstrua." O. N. "Missed 3 months. Menstrua deserves wonderful praise." H. W. "4 other remedies failed. Menstrua relieved 6 weeks delay." A. F. 9 doses relieved 7 weeks delay Splendid." M. M. "Delayed 9 weeks. ½ box worked. Other remedies failed. Amazing." L. G. "Relieved 2 delays (5 weeks and 9 weeks). Wonderful. Painless." F. D. "Tried many similar medicines. None ever worked. Imagine my surprise and happiness when after missing 2 periods Menstrua did the trick." E. W. "Missed 2 months and 1 box brought wonderful results." E. Y. "After several similar products failed Menstrua did wonderful work."

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When you order MENSTRUA we will not send literature telling of something better and "stronger," for we have only one relief compound—the best we can procure! In MENSTRUA we offer you our BEST product FIRST, and at the lowest possible price—a price no higher than asked for ordinary relief compounds. SAFETY, PURETY GUARANTEED! Price $2.00. Orders rushed same day received, postpaid, in plain, sealed box. "PRICELESS INFORMATION" free with order.

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Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. **Not a toy.** Put on your own programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun. Easy to operate.

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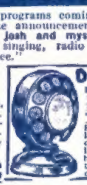

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Large, substantial, all-metal mike. Practise radio singing, announcing, programs, etc., thru your own radio. Reproduces voice in loud, clear tone without distortion. Regulable model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed. Connected with 75c cut, tools. Price

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MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music Programs and Sports Everywhere You Go! Loud Tone

Beautiful clear tone while you walk! The amazing midget pocket radio gives you all the entertainment of a radio wherever you are—in the country, office, on a boat, in a car, hotel, in bed, on bicycles, **ANYWHERE and EVERYWHERE.** Size of a cigarette package, yet it operates perfectly. **Beautiful clear tone.** Range, 50 miles. **No static or noise. No batteries, no tubes. Just, one crystal.** Useful for locating stations. New sensitive rectifier and high efficiency design.

Not a toy. **Price Postpaid $1.00. Earphone, 89c. Phone & Radio Set $1.79.**

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This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 2-3 miles of a station or up to 100 miles under good conditions. All you need is an aerial & ear phone. Completely assembled & wired with inexpensive crystal, stand, base, variation, arm with whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. **25c**

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Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Study its habits. Watch it catch flies and insects. Wear one on the lapel of your coat and watch it catch flies and insects about its head. Or use for food. No trouble about it at all. Long. Shipped without food. **Only 25c** Sent postpaid to any address in USA by mail. Guaranteed to arrive safe arrival and live delivery. **Only 25c**

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What will it bring for you? What will happen? Let Madame Le-Normand's Fortune Telling Cards predict the future! Just get a deck and friends for miles around will want to get in on the fun. At parties, gatherings, evenings, etc., everyone will want you to tell their fortunes. When things start to slow up and the guests start to yawn, pull a pack and mystify and amaze them. Yet these cards are simple and fascinating. Yet there is nothing difficult to telling the fortunes—every card is plainly marked with its meaning and the connection between the cards becomes at once apparent. Complete directions with each deck. **Price 35c per deck. Deluxe deck with 53 ivory finished cards. 75c. postpaid.**

SWEATER EMBLEMS

BOYS! Just what you've wanted—dandy, brilliant blue & orange **FELT EMBLEMS,** all ready to put on the front of your sweater or jacket. Just hand them in your "den." Easy to sew on and they look keen. Select the design you want: **Fancy Dancer, Skull & Cross Bones, Diving Girl, Lizard, Pirate, Good Luck Emblem, Football, Jewelry, etc. Small, 2" Scout or Lizard. Price Each Postpaid 25c.**

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Positively most fun ever invented! Fits the finger like a ring, but concealed in palm is the **TICKLER.** The Buzzer, or tickler, contains a clockwork movement that is wound up. Whenever it is touched, the mechanism is released, giving the victim a shock. Every time you shake hands, your friend will get a terrific shock. Touch them on the back, and watch them jump. They will hit the ceiling if they sit on it. Under a sheet it feels like a mouse. Use it as a "tie-tack" or window. Hundreds of uses. **ONLY.... 28c**

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Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs and night watchmen as a means of protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand. Useful in an emergency. Aluminum. Wt. 2 oz. Pocket size. **25c. 2 for 45c.**

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Eagle-Eye Vision
Six Power
25c

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IRWIN *Safety Film* MOVING PICTURE PROJECTOR

Hi-Powered Air Pistols

A powerful high Air Pistol, gun shaped like an automatic, pocket size. Fires B B shot anywhere. Very powerful yet perfectly safe for boys to handle. Two styles. Single shot Pistol or Repeater. The Repeater holds 100 shots in one loading. The Single Shot shoots rifle Darts and BB Shot. Well made and durable; all metal parts nickle plated; natural grain wood stock. Front and rear sights, etc. Better than an air rifle. Shipped express collect.

Single Shot Pistol $2.50; 100 Shot Pistol $3.00

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LUMINOUS PAINT, when applied to an object, paints rays of white light, rendering it visible in the dark. The darker the night—the brighter it shines. Simple to apply. Paint the knobs of the door, the dial of your watch so you can tell time at night. Paint pushbuttons, switches, anything, everything with it. **Small Bottle, 25c, Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00 postpaid.**

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THROW YOUR VOICE!

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE WONDERFUL VENTRILO

a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. Sent postpaid for only..... 10c

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Smart, snappy. Just what every real boy is wearing. Comfort & style. **White Twill Yacht Cap,** with black eighteen peak, sweat band, gold braid and brass buttons **25c**
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White Duck Yacht Cap, superquality duck, white celluloid cap, gold cord, brass buttons and red, white and blue anchor on front. State size. Price postpaid **35c**

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Adds, subtracts, multiplies, divides. Does work of a costly machine. Over a million owners. Simple and accurate. **NO TOY.** Has keyboard, keys to punch, no lever to pull. Total always visible. Guaranteed for 5 years. Lightning calculator and adder. Made of steel throughout, ensuring strength, durability and reliability for a lifetime. Compact and light. Weighs 7 oz. Will fit right in vest pocket and can be carried about without inconvenience. 2x6in. Price **$1.50**

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The most novel, popular and useful bank ever invented! A regular slot machine, savings bank and profit-maker all in one. Just think of having this handy bank around, and as soon as your friends drop in a penny, nickel or dime—out comes a chocolate bar, all wrapped up! **Leave the bank around the house, and you will soon find that it fills up while you're gone. An easy way to save money.**

Get Plenty of Chocolates—They'll Go Fast!

Well made of sheet metal with a regular locked door so you can open and remove the money and fill it with chocolate bars. On the front is a **slot to drop the coin in,** a window showing the chocolate bars, and a **regular drawer that opens when each coin is deposited.** Handsomely lithographed in brilliant yellow, green and red. Get two or three banks and PLENTY of refills—they'll go fast.

SWEET THRIFT BANK & SLOT MACHINE. Only 25c
Chocolate Bars to fit in the Machine. Package of 10.. 10c

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Roll your own and save money. Better and quicker than ready made. Neat, useful, handy. Pocket size, weighs 1½ ounce. Nickel plated metal. **Price 25c**
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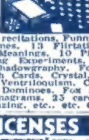

326 Jokes & Riddles; 35 Tricks, 10 Parlor Games, 72 Toasts, 10 Stories, 105 Money-making Secrets, 22 Monologues, 21 Puzzles, Problems, Comic recitations, Funny Readings, 10 Parlor Pastimes, 100 Funny Sayings, Names & their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, Amusing Experiments, Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Fortune Teller, Fortunes with Cards, Crystal, Tea Cup, etc., Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Tests of Memory, Checkers, Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 10 Men Morris, Authentic 23 Parlor Magic Tricks, Crystal Gazing, etc., etc. **Only 15c**

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Gene Autry's sensational collection, containing 30 big songs. Mairied Daddy of Mine, Gangster's Warning, I'll be Thinking of You, Little Gal, My Old Pal of Yesterday, Communism Blues, Why Don't You Come Back to Me, and 24 others. 64 page book. Only 39c Postpaid

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Blued steel 6-shot automatic blank pistol. **Fires blanks only.** Looks exactly like expensive automatic. Shipped by express, prepaid. Price $5.50. Uses special cartridges, 75c per 100.

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Strongly constructed with a flashy nickel finish. Has dip barrel that allows the cartridges to be loaded in a second. **Medium size, Large size $1.00. Blank Cartridges 50c per 100. Holster (Cowboy Type), 50c. SHIPPED BY EXPRESS, NOT PREPAID.**

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Why envy the easy rhythm and fascinating grace of Step'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance in ONLY 6 HOURS by a new simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart! Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Beat out a tune with your feet.

310 Illustrations

Hostesses love it. Friends adore it. Besides, tap dancing is not only invigorating and entertaining but is also a beautiful exercise for making the limbs supple and giving a "springy" feeling of fitness to the whole body. Promises slimness where it's wanted—no pills, drugs or dieting. Readers say: "...wonderful book. Thank you for adding tap dancing to my accomplishments." **Price 25c postpaid.**

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OVER 101 ILLUSTRATIONS

LATEST STEPS. Be popular. Good dancers are always welcome—always popular guests. Partners welcome those who dance. The newest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't make excuses when the music starts. Lots of fun from parties and dances.

25 Cents

If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance at home in this new easy way. **BOOK TELLS:** How to develop poise and control, improve your dance steps, art of holding, how to walk to music, how to lead, latest fox trot steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Wave, The Quickstep swaying to music, Waltz, Backward changes, the Continental, The famous Knee dance, the Manhattan, the College Rhumba, the Carlo, Cin'eston, etc. Art of Dancing **25c**

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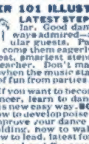
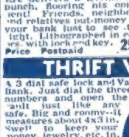


The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with wrist, arm, throat, neck locks, body holds, defense against revolver, straight arm, armlocks, scissors, splits, headlock, a man down, double knee throw, stick attack, defense against knife, one hand throat grip, defense against two assailants, scientific throw, nerve thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no bully. Be "self-reliant." "Science of Ju Jitsu" **Only 30c.**

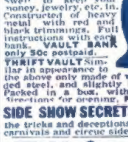
Hands Up!

Knockout BANK



Big, jumbo 3½x2½x3½" bank with real leather boxing gloves and two-gun. **Pop-Eye** and his enemy. Each and every time a coin is inserted in the bank, the fight begins, and Pop-Eye delivers a terrific KO punch, flooring his opponent. Friends, neighbors and relatives put money in your bank just to see the fight. Lithographed in colors with lock and key. **25c Postpaid**

POP EYE BANK



THRIFT VAULT 50c

A 3 dial safe lock and Vault Bank. Just dial the three numbers and open the vault just like the safe. Big and roomy—it measures about 4x3½. Swell to keep your jewelry, etc. in. Constructed of heavy metal with red and black trimmings. Full instructions with each bank. **VAULT BANK only 50c postpaid.**

THRIFT VAULT Similar in appearance to the above, but made of wet. ged steel, and slightly larger. Packed in a box, with complete directions for opening. Price, postpaid **$1.25**

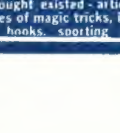
SIDE SHOW SECRETS book which exposes the tricks and deceptions practised by carnivals and circus sideshows. Price **10c**

USN

Quartermaster - Navy - CCC - Marine - Army Ring

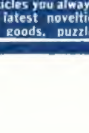
Big jumbo size, with a flashy emblem, surrounded by the American Eagle. Like the U.S. Government men wear! State type and size. **Silver Finish, Sterling Silver, $1.00. 14 kt. Gold Ring, $1.75.**

Good Luck Ring



Very striking, quaint and uncommon. Oxidized gun-metal finish; skull and crossbones design; two brilliant flashing imitation rubies or emeralds sparkle out of the eyes. Said to bring good luck to the wearer. **Only 25c.**

FRENCH PHOTO RING



A handsome ring, finished in imitation platinum & set with a large imitation diamond. In the side of the ring is a small miniature picture of a most invisible to the naked eye, yet magnifies to an almost incredible degree. Pictures of bathing girl beauties, French actresses, views of France, Panama Canal, Lord's Prayer (every word legible). **Price Postpaid.. 25c**

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Water Wings impart such confidence in water that everyone can learn to swim and float after one trial. Expert swimmers use them to cover long distances, to swim in deep water. Will support up to 180 lbs. Can be carried in the pocket and blown up when arriving at seashore. **Price 25c**

Ladies' Panties Hanky

A perfect model of the most necessary lingerie garment worn by ladies, which, when folded and worn in the pocket, has the appearance of being a gentleman's handkerchief. A clever, funny joke. **Price 15c Postpaid.**

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